



# THE SPOTLIGHT

## দি স্পটলাইট



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### INDEPENDENCE DAY 2026 স্বাধীনতা দিবস ২০২৬

SPECIAL ISSUE

বিশেষ সংখ্যা

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**PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

১২ চৈত্র ১৪৩২  
26 March 2026

*On the occasion of the 56th Independence Day of Bangladesh, a special issue of The Spotlight, the official publication of the Global Center for Democratic Governance, is being released. I extend my sincere greetings and best wishes to all members of the Editorial Board, distinguished contributors, and members of the GCDG.*

*In the early hours of 26 March 1971, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh. Responding to his call, the freedom-loving people of the country engaged in a nine-month-long struggle, ultimately defeating the Pakistani occupation forces and their local collaborators, including the Jamaat e Islam, Razakars, Al-Badr, and Al-Shams.*

*Through immense sacrifice, Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign and independent nation. On this solemn occasion, we pay our deepest respect to the three million martyrs who laid down their lives for the nation. We also solemnly remember the immense suffering and sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of women during the Liberation War. Their courage remains an enduring testament to the resilience of the Bangladeshi people.*

*We extend our profound gratitude and highest honour to the valiant freedom fighters whose dedication and sacrifice made independence possible.*

Warm Regards.

Prof Dr Md Habibe Millat  
MBBS, FRCS(Edin)  
President, Global Center for Democratic Governance

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

*A Bengali poet wrote, "Who wants to live without freedom, who wants to live? Who will wear the chains of slavery, who will wear them?" How many thousands of years have Bengalis spent with the shame of subjugation? Then one day, a leader came. He said, "No one can suppress us." In exchange for insurmountable suffering, destruction, the lives of 3 million martyrs, and the honour and dignity of 200,000 mothers and sisters, in 1971, we got an independent homeland, Bangladesh, with a red and green flag and a constitution.*

*When the "bottomless basket" of that time, suffering from hunger and poverty, became self-sufficient in food in 2013-24, becoming a country with a GDP of \$460 billion and a per capita income of \$2,800, and people started enjoying the fruits of freedom, that's when the blow came. The country deviated from the highway of becoming a middle-income and ultimately developed country. The last eighteen months since 5 August 2024 have been a festival of unrest and a suicidal game of destruction, led by a vengeful, selfish, mob king, and violent Yunus, of all the achievements of the country.*

*His 18-month-long illegal rule has destroyed the country's stability, economic progress, social security, political culture, social and cultural values, and social harmony. It goes without saying that the elections held illegally, banning the country's largest popular political party from participating by executive order of the Interim Yunus Government, will create long-term instability unless they are withdrawn immediately. We hope that in the interest of fulfilling the pledge to realise the aspirations of the great Liberation War, Bengalis at home and abroad, international media, intellectuals and leaders of democratic values will speak out against such unconstitutional activities. All the mainstream political parties and their affiliates, which have the support of the people, will return to the path of healthy politics through the practice of free politics. We want the country that became independent through the Liberation War to be governed by political parties holding the ideals of the Liberation War, democratic, non-communal, and carrying the flag of social justice and harmony. Only then will the independence of Bangladesh be secure and meaningful.*

Mohammad Abdur Rashid ,PhD  
Editor

১২ চৈত্র ১৪৩২/26 March 2026

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# BANGLADESH: AN EPIC JOURNEY TO SELF-ASSERTION

Syed Badrul Ahsan\*

## Introduction

THIS MAY BE MY LAST MESSAGE. FROM TODAY BANGLADESH IS INDEPENDENT. I CALL UPON THE PEOPLE OF BANGLADESH, WHEREVER YOU ARE AND WITH WHATEVER YOU HAVE, TO RESIST THE OCCUPATION ARMY. OUR FIGHT WILL GO ON TILL THE LAST SOLDIER OF THE PAKISTAN OCCUPATION ARMY IS EXPELLED FROM THE SOIL OF INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH. FINAL VICTORY IS OURS. JOY BANGLA!

--- Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's declaration of independence in the early minutes of 26 March 1971.

Minutes later, the terse, grim words went out, „Big bird in cage. Little birds have flown.“ It was from a Pakistan army officer to his superiors in Dhaka cantonment.

It was about the arrest of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the early hours of March 26, 1971, soon after the Father of the Nation had declared the independence of Bangladesh. Moments earlier, as March 25 drew to an end, the Pakistan army had launched its genocide of Bengalis through the misleadingly termed Operation Searchlight. Into the net were soon trapped academics and students, pedestrians and rickshaw pullers, policemen and personnel of the East Pakistan Rifles. Thousands were done away with on that night. It was to be the beginning of a long nightmare.

As the genocide got underway, Pakistan's president, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, was preparing to land in Rawalpindi after a long, circuitous flight over the Indian Ocean from Dhaka. In what had by then turned into an occupied Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was first taken to the under-construction national assembly premises and made to wait there until the military officers who had arrested him received instructions from their superiors on what to do with him. One of the officers asked Lt. General Tikka Khan, the martial law administrator, if he wished to have the Bengali leader brought to him. Tikka responded contemptuously, „I don't want to see his face“. Mujib was eventually taken to Adamjee Cantonment College, where he would be confined for a few days until his flight to West Pakistan.

On the evening of 26 March, General Yahya Khan addressed the unsuspecting people of Pakistan on the developments that had taken place. Even as Pakistan's citizens, in both wings of the country, waited to hear the president spell out the details of what they thought would be a transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people, the military ruler stunned everyone with news of the crackdown in East Pakistan. Mujib was accused of treason. The Awami League was charged with conspiracy to break up Pakistan. „This crime,“ roared the general darkly, „will not go unpunished“. The next day, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, retrieved by the Pakistan army from Dhaka, landed in Karachi. He gushed to waiting newsmen, „Thank God, Pakistan has been saved.“ A day after that, in distant Chittagong, a Bengali major in the Pakistan army, Ziaur Rahman, announced Bangladesh's independence on behalf of „our great national leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.“ Meanwhile, senior Awami League leaders, students and citizens of all classes and professions were finding their way out of Dhaka and towards safer climes in the villages and small towns of the new country.

## Declaration of Independence and the Dawn of an Independent Bangladesh

The Declaration of Independence precipitated a whole range of activity across the globe. The British journalist David Loshak heard Bangabandhu's voice declaring independence in the early minutes of 26 March. Simon Dring's reports on the first night of the massacre made the rounds in London and elsewhere, revealing the ferocity with which the Pakistan government had gone after the Bengalis. Pakistani military intelligence picked up Bangabandhu's voice on a secure transmitter. In early April, even before any formal arrangements were in place for a prosecution of the war of liberation, two Bengali diplomats posted at the Pakistan mission in Bombay, K.M. Shehabuddin and Amjad Hossain, declared their allegiance to Bangladesh. At around the same time, Soviet President Nikolai Podgorny wrote to President Yahya Khan, asking him to reach a political settlement with the elected political leadership in East Pakistan. Yahya's response was an angry one. He denied the government was doing anything wrong. It did not help his regime, though, that Bengali refugees in their thousands were crossing the border into India every day as a way of escaping the wrath of his army. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called for the detained Mujib to be guaranteed safety. Bengali rebels, though, were doing things slightly differently: they kept up the refrain of Bangabandhu being free and directing battles against the Pakistanis. The worry, however, was that Mujib might already have been murdered by the army. For its part, keen to expose the hollowness of the rebels' claim of Mujib being free, the Pakistani regime released the picture of Mujib in police custody at Karachi airport. That was sometime before mid-April. No other information was given.

And yet, at the time, senior Bengali politicians, all Bangabandhu's close associates --- Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, M. Mansoor Ali, A.H. M. Quamruzzaman --- gradually and painstakingly linked up with one another. By 12 April, Tajuddin Ahmed had a rudimentary governmental structure for Bangladesh in place. But it was not until 17 April that a formal announcement of the formation of a provisional government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh would be made at a spot in Meherpur, Chuadanga. The place was named Mujibnagar. With Amirul Islam, the lawyer responsible with Tajuddin Ahmad for the draft of the Proclamation of Independence on 10 April, working overtime to ensure the presence of the global media on the occasion, the first Bengali government in history went to work. Tagore's Amar Shonar Bangla was sung (it would eventually be adopted as Bangladesh's national anthem), and Colonel Mohammad Ataul Gani Osmany, commander in chief of the Bangladesh Mukti Bahini, supervised the guard of honour. Professor Yusuf Ali read out the Proclamation of Independence, which acknowledged the primacy of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the president of the republic. In his absence, Syed Nazrul Islam would be acting president. And Tajuddin Ahmed would take charge as prime minister.

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News of Bangladesh's first government's arrival was disseminated to the world. And then came more news --- that Hossain Ali, Pakistan's Bengali-speaking deputy high commissioner in Calcutta, had switched his allegiance to Bangladesh along with his fellow Bengali officers. The mission premises came under his control. Diplomats of West Pakistani origin were barred from entering the premises. Across the globe, as the army killed increasingly larger numbers of Bengalis and as the number of refugees crossing into India swelled, media and popular opinion condemned Pakistan. The Soviet bloc made unmistakable signs of supporting the Bengali cause. In India, the government came in with material and moral support for Bangladesh. Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury moved from Geneva, where he had gone before the crackdown to attend a human rights conference, to London. His presence lent additional weight to the cause abroad. Expatriate Bengalis gathered around him, and he quickly became an authentic voice for Bangladesh in Europe.

Certainly, there were those who did not sympathise with Bangladesh's people. President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, using Pakistan as a conduit to America's opening with China, looked the other way as the Pakistan army went on raping and killing in Bangladesh. The left-leaning Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani's appeals to China for support for the Bengali struggle went unanswered. Pakistan's ambassador to Beijing (or Peking as it then was), Khwaja Mohammad Kaiser, a member of Dhaka's Nawab clan, was in a dilemma. Prime Minister Zhou En-lai told him he understood his difficulties (in post-1971 times, Kaiser would return to Beijing, as Bangladesh's ambassador to that country).

Things were different in Europe. In Britain, Prime Minister Edward Heath, Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home and opposition leader Harold Wilson comprehended popular feelings and appreciated Bangladesh's stand. But circumspect was what they were, in line with the conventions of diplomacy. In France, Andre Malraux, formerly minister for culture in Charles de Gaulle's government, expressed his intention of forming an international brigade to help the Mukti Bahini. The media in Africa, in such Middle Eastern nations as Egypt and in Indonesia kept up a barrage of news reports and editorial comments on the deteriorating situation in Bangladesh. George Harrison's concert for Bangladesh at New York's Madison Square Garden in August 1971 injected fresh new energy into the struggle and brought the urgency of the Bengali struggle closer to the West. For its part, the Mujibnagar government sent out its envoys --- Abdus Samad Azad, Mohiuddin Ahmed and others --- to Europe with the message of liberation. Bengali diplomats defected in droves and linked up with the Bangladesh movement. Some did not, and would not, until the last few weeks of the war. Some would stay loyal to Pakistan until Pakistan felt it had little use for them (and that was after its army had been defeated on the battlefield). The Bengali cause was boosted when a non-Bengali Pakistani diplomat, Iqbal Athar, denounced his country and came over to Bangladesh.

At home, the Mujibnagar government, strengthened by the arrival of civil servants and soldiers, worked overtime to guide the nation to freedom. The Mukti Bahini boasted the presence of capable Bengali officers --- Khaled Musharraf, K.M. Shafiullah, Ziaur Rahman, A.K. Khondokar, Abu Taher, C.R. Dutta, Nuruzzaman, et al --- and operated in eleven sectors. Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, the radio outfit of the government, was peopled by leading Bengali media and cultural personalities and broadcast stirring messages of hope and endurance to the nation. Periodicals like *Joi Bangla* carried the message of liberation into occupied Bangladesh. Ten million Bengalis, of a total population of seventy-five million, were already in India as refugees. In August, the Pakistani regime put the incarcerated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on trial for waging war against Pakistan. In September, Abu Sayeed Chowdhury led the Bangladesh delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. But he was not permitted to address the body. In November, Indira Gandhi travelled to Europe and the United States to explain India's position on Bangladesh.

On 3 December, after Pakistan's air force raided targets in India on the western sector, New Delhi went into full-scale war with Islamabad. An Indo-Bangladesh Joint Command pushed deeper into occupied Bangladesh. In the west, the Indian army gained swathes of territory in Pakistan's Sind and Punjab provinces. On 16 December 1971, 93,000 soldiers of the Pakistan army, led by Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, surrendered to the Mukti Bahini and the Indian army at the Race Course in Dhaka. Bangladesh was a free people's republic. And yet the price its people paid in the struggle for freedom would be unprecedented in the annals of history. Three million Bengalis would be murdered by the Pakistani forces, and two hundred thousand women would be raped by the soldiers. On the eve of victory, an entire body of Bengali intellectuals would be rounded up by the local collaborators of the army and murdered in a gruesome manner. The landscape would be littered with broken bridges, burnt-out villages and ruined towns.

### The Shaping of a Genocide

In the period between General Yahya Khan's arrival in Dhaka on 15 March 1971 for talks with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his secret departure for Karachi ten days later, the Pakistan army had sufficiently reinforced itself in terms of men and materiel necessary for military action against the Bengalis. The negotiations were a façade. The reality was the intrigue progressively shaping up in the military hierarchy since the results of the December 1970 election had given the Awami League a mandate to form Pakistan's first elected government.

By the evening of 25 March, all hopes for a political solution to the crisis in Pakistan had all but vanished. A day earlier, on 24 March, sensing the sinister intentions of the Yahya Khan junta, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman instructed his aides to propose to the regime that a wholesale transformation was now needed to redefine the concept of the state of Pakistan. The country would no longer be a federation, but would or could be reconfigured as a confederation.

The message was duly conveyed to the junta. Lt.Gen. SGMM Peerzada, a leading member of the junta, promised to get back to the Awami League the next morning. Dr Kamal Hossain and other leaders of the Awami League waited all day on 25 March for the call. The call did not come, of course, even though the Awami League had not quite given up hope about a proclamation being issued by President Yahya Khan on the modalities of a transfer of power through a withdrawal of martial law.

Things were quite different in the military establishment, though. Having received the green signal from Yahya Khan, Gen-

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eral Tikka Khan phoned General Khadem Husain Raja on 25 March and told him: “Khadem, it is tonight”. That was the first sign of an impending military assault on Bengalis. Through the afternoon and evening, Pakistani army officers helicoptered across the province to spread the word among the various army formations that they had to be on standby for military operations to get underway. A number of West Pakistani political leaders visited Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at his residence in Dhanmondi to bid him a sad farewell. Among them were Mir Ghaus Bux Bizenjo and Khan Abdul Wali Khan.

Sometime after dusk, General Yahya Khan, in a stealthy manner and without officially bringing the ongoing negotiations to an end, boarded a Pakistan International Airlines flight at Tejgaon airport for Karachi. The orders were that the military assault, codenamed Operation Searchlight, would not begin until his aircraft had safely landed in Karachi. The junta was obviously afraid that if the killing mission began once Yahya’s flight took off, the Indian authorities could force his aircraft to touch down somewhere before it reached Pakistan.

By 10 pm, it had become clear to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that an armed assault on citizens was on the way. He exhorted the senior leaders of his party to move to safety. Even so, when Kamal Hossain met him at around 10 pm, he asked him if there had been any phone call from the regime. Hossain replied in the negative before leaving Bangabandhu’s residence. Tajuddin Ahmad tried persuading Mujib to leave the city along with other party leaders. For his part, Mujib instructed him and the others to find a safe sanctuary while he waited for the army to come for him.

Rumours of an imminent strike by the army led students of Dhaka University and citizens in general into putting up barricades in different parts of the city to thwart movements by the soldiers. No one, at that point, could visualise the scale of the ferocity with which the army planned to strike.

The Pakistan army pounced on the people of Bangladesh between 11.30 pm and midnight. Different units of the army fanned out in various directions. Tanks, armoured cars and trucks loaded with soldiers headed for Dhaka University, the Shaheed Minar, Bangabandhu’s residence on Road 32 Dhanmondi, the Police Lanes at Rajarbagh, the Peekhana headquarters of East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), Hotel Intercontinental and Old Dhaka. Tracer fire lit up the night sky, with guns roaring all across town. The army moved to remove all foreign journalists from the Intercontinental and put them on flights out of the province. And then began the long night of killing — of academics, students, Bengali police personnel, as well as members of the East Pakistan Rifles, rickshaw pullers and citizens in general.

The Shaheed Minar, long the symbol of Bengali nationalism, was reduced to rubble. The Kali Mandir would suffer a similar fate within a couple of days. At Jagannath Hall and other halls of Dhaka University, soldiers stormed into the rooms and dormitories and murdered hundreds of students. They killed Professor Gobinda Chandra Dev of the department of philosophy and Professor Rafiqul Islam of mathematics. They grievously wounded Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta of the department of English. Guhathakurta was to die of his wounds a few days later. Hundreds of students were murdered and buried in mass graves on the DU campus.

An academic, Professor Nurul Ula, spent an entire night recording, from within the safe confines of his quarters in the university area, the shooting of students by the soldiers. On the morning of 26 March, the soldiers gunned down Commander Moazzam Hossain, who had been a prominent accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case in 1968-69. The offices of the radical newspaper The People were burned down by the soldiers. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, chairman of the Pakistan People’s Party, watched Dhaka burn from his suite in the Intercontinental Hotel.

Senior leaders of the Awami League, including Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, M. Mansoor Ali and AHM Quamruzzaman, made their way out of Dhaka in line with Bangabandhu’s instructions. For his part, as the hour struck midnight, Bangabandhu made a declaration of Bangladesh’s independence, which message was passed on to Chittagong Awami League leader M.A. Hannan on wireless.

Soon after he had declared Bangladesh a free nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was taken into custody by the Pakistan army. Over the next few days, he would be kept at Adamjee Cantonment College in Dhaka before being flown to West Pakistan.

Throughout the night between 25 March and 26 March, the Pakistan army killed Bengalis. All day long on 26 March, the killings went on. An overseas journalist would report that on those two days, no fewer than 7,000 people would be murdered by the army. The genocide would go on for nine months, leaving three million Bengalis dead, 200,000-plus Bengali women raped by Pakistan’s soldiers, and countless villages and towns burned and destroyed.

### 4. All those Genocide Men

We remember the atrocities unleashed on 25 March 1971 by the Pakistan occupation army in Bangladesh. The Yahya Khan junta euphemistically called it Operation Searchlight. It mutated into indiscriminate killings and rape of Bengalis in the nine months between March and December of that dreadful year.

Today, as the momentum builds for the global community, in the form of the United Nations, to acknowledge the murder of three million Bengalis as a genocide perpetrated by an occupying army, it is fitting and proper that we in Bangladesh recall, for the benefit of the world, for its enlightenment, the crimes committed by the genocide makers. It is proper that we speak of all those men who for nine long months went about their ghoulish mission of trying to

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wipe out our national identity and our cultural heritage through brute military force.

These men are the genocide men. They killed and raped and pillaged before biting the dust here in this land. They became prisoners of war before going back to their country. They went through no punishment for their crimes. No Nuremberg-like trials ever tried them or convicted them.

This is the story of those merchants of death let loose in Bangladesh fifty-two years ago.

On my very first visit to Pakistan in December 1995 (nearly twenty-five years after I had left it as a high school student in July 1971), as part of a group of journalists at a conference organized by the South Asian Media Association (SAMA), the general manager of the IFIC bank branch in Lahore acquainted us with how he had once rebuffed Rao Farman Ali. Apparently, the man reviled for planning the killing of Bengali intellectuals had once come to the IFIC bank, ostensibly to open an account. The general manager, a proper Bengali and a freedom fighter, made him sit down but did not shake hands with him. "I had no wish to touch his blood-stained hand," he told us.

Farman Ali clearly did not relish the rebuff, much though he tried to be friendly with the general manager. He left with a form for an account to be opened, promising to return. He never did. Rao Farman Ali, who was a prisoner of war in India after the 1971 war, was later to serve as a minister in General Ziaul Haq's regime. He died in January 2004. No contrition was there in him for his role in 1971. He, along with other war criminals, was never punished or shamed in Pakistan.

On a PIA flight from Karachi to Lahore years ago, I became acquainted with a retired Pakistani brigadier named A.R. Siddiqi. He seemed to be a proper gentleman and explained to me that back in 1971, he had been in charge of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR). Siddik Salik, he told me, was his subordinate in Dhaka. Brigadier Siddiqi told me of the shock he went through when the Pakistan army launched its genocide, for he had been in Dhaka when Operation Searchlight was launched.

"I am writing my account of the war," Siddiqi told me. I asked him if he meant to reveal everything in his book. He promised he would. I am glad to report that when the book, *East Pakistan: The Endgame: An Onlooker's Journal 1969-1971*, appeared some years later, Siddiqi kept his promise. His account of the crisis, especially of the early days of Operation Searchlight, is riveting. It is one of the few objective books to have come out of Pakistan from a Pakistani who was part of the military establishment in 1971.

I have not met Brigadier Siddiqi after that conversation on the Karachi-Lahore flight. But years earlier, I did have an opportunity to come across Brigadier Siddik Salik, the writer of the acclaimed book *Witness to Surrender*, when he accompanied General Ziaul Haq to the first SAARC summit in Dhaka in December 1985. He spoke fondly, as he said (though I detected a certain cynicism in him), of his time in Dhaka throughout the war. I asked him what difference he noticed between 1971 and 1985 in Bangladesh. His mischievous reply was: "People here are poorer than before." In other words, Pakistan was good, Bangladesh was not. I decided I did not want to get into a quarrel with him. Salik was never to pay a price for his sins. He became press advisor to General Ziaul Haq.

Siddik Salik was taken prisoner on 16 December 1971 and spent nearly three years in a PoW camp in India before returning to Pakistan with his fellow prisoners. He perished in the air crash that killed General Ziaul Haq, a number of senior military officers and the American ambassador to Pakistan in August 1988.

Khadim Hussain Raja, the general who was told by Tikka Khan early on the morning of 25 March, "Khadim, it is tonight," went into full-scale action against Bengalis as midnight drew near. Over the next couple of weeks, his soldiers fanned out all across Dhaka and then beyond it, shooting everyone they came across. Once the initial phase of the pogrom was done, his macabre mission accomplished, Raja was transferred to West Pakistan, where he was given a fresh command.

Raja did not return to Dhaka and therefore was lucky enough to avoid becoming a PoW. After his retirement from the army, he jotted down his recollections of the war in Bangladesh, leaving his family with instructions that they should not be published in his lifetime. It was only after his death that his book, titled *„A Stranger in My Own Country: East Pakistan 1969-1971*, hit the stands. He died in 1999.

General Tikka Khan, who in his career earned the dubious distinction of being both Butcher of Baluchistan and Butcher of Bangladesh, remained unconcerned by any questions about his role in the killing of Bengalis. After serving as governor and martial law administrator (the latter position till April 1971) of East Pakistan, he left for West Pakistan in September 1971 to take over as a corps commander.

Under Z.A. Bhutto, Tikka Khan became Pakistan's chief of army staff and on his retirement, joined the Pakistan People's Party. He served as secretary general of the party as well as governor of Punjab. He died of old age ailments in March 2002. No court of law ever brought him to trial for his crimes in Bangladesh.

Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi took over as martial law administrator, East Pakistan, in April 1971 and continued in that position till he signed the document of the Pakistan army's surrender to Indo-Bangladesh forces in December of the same year. After spending three years as a prisoner of war in India, he returned home to a bad reception. He was stripped of his rank and excoriated for surrendering in Dhaka, but did not face justice. He later went into politics by joining the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan, but could not make much headway. He died in February 2004.

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General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, who as president of Pakistan and chief martial law administrator, ordered military operations against Bengalis in March 1971, presided over the break-up of the country nine months later. Compelled to hand over power to Pakistan People's Party chairman Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on 20 December 1971, he spent the entire period of the Bhutto dispensation in house arrest. It was only when General Ziaul Haq overthrew Bhutto in July 1977 that Yahya Khan was freed from confinement. He died, in disgrace, in August 1980, but was nevertheless given a state funeral by the Zia regime.

And then there is the fate of the conspiratorial and inordinately ambitious Bhutto himself. With East Pakistan turning into Bangladesh, Bhutto became president by default of what remained of Pakistan. With the enactment of a new constitution for Pakistan in August 1973, he took over as prime minister under a parliamentary form of government. Overthrown by the army after a long period of violence following rigged elections in March 1977, he was executed on conviction for murder in April 1979.

Thus, the stories of all those Pakistanis who were involved in the dark history of 1971. In none of them was there any fear of God and morality as they went about committing genocide in occupied Bangladesh. They cheerfully killed Bengalis, raped women, burnt and pillaged, all in the name of God and the territorial integrity of Pakistan.

There is more to the tale. When a war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh some years ago tried, convicted and sent a number of local Bengali collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army to the gallows, the Pakistan national assembly (with Nawaz Sharif in power) adopted a resolution condemning the act. It praised the executed collaborators as patriotic Pakistanis.

That successive governments in Pakistan have looked away from the grave need of publicly apologising to Bangladesh for the war crimes committed by their army is a regrettable part of Pakistan's history. A Pakistan army museum in Lahore reflects the denial of history Pakistanis have been made to live with since the emergence of Bangladesh more than fifty years ago. A poster in the museum brazenly informs Pakistanis that in 1971, genocide was committed by the Mukti Bahini and not by the Pakistan army! Another poster, equally brazenly, lets people know that the Mukti Bahini was South Asia's first terrorist outfit and was set up by India!

Students at academic institutions in Pakistan have little knowledge of the truth about what their soldiers did in Bangladesh all those decades ago. History textbooks speak of an Indian conspiracy, in league with some Bengali politicians, to break up Pakistan. It is a heavily sanitised history that the young in Pakistan are educated on.

Pakistani leaders, post-1971, have visited Bangladesh. None of them, however, went for a public apology for the criminal acts of their army in occupied Bangladesh.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto reluctantly visited the National Memorial on his visit to Bangladesh in June 1974. He refused to doff his cap, thus refusing to show respect to Bangladesh's freedom fighters. When a comment book was placed before him to record his sentiments, he rudely pushed it away. „Enough of this nonsense, he said.

General Ziaul Haq, visiting the National Memorial in 1985, was asked by Bangladesh's journalists about his feelings regarding 1971. He glibly remarked, „Your heroes are our heroes.”

Benazir Bhutto briefly visited Dhaka in the late 1980s but did not make her way to the National Memorial.

General Pervez Musharraf expressed regret over the military action of 1971, but stopped short of coming forth with a clear statement of apology. Imran Khan, before ascending to power in Pakistan and after losing it, spoke critically of the destruction wrought by the Pakistan army in Bangladesh. In office, however, he refrained from condemning the military over the genocide against Bengalis in 1971.

Be it remembered that the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman allowed the Pakistani prisoners of war to go free through the tripartite agreement reached by India, Bangladesh and Pakistan in April 1974 — by extracting a promise from the Bhutto government in Pakistan that the 195 Pakistani army officers charged by Bangladesh with committing genocide would be placed on trial in Islamabad. It was a promise not kept.

### Our Martyred Intellectuals

Fifty-five years ago, we lost them. The merchants of death snuffed the life out of them even as the land they loved was beginning to come to life through a great assertion of liberty. They were among the finest of people in Bengali society. Between them, and among them, they straddled a whole wide region of cultural ideas and political aspirations. They embodied the nationalism that had come to be associated with the ethos of this country since it was first felt, through the Language Movement of 1952 and then in the course of the Six Point movement for autonomy, that Bengalis needed to branch out on their own, towards a distinctive, sovereign political identity.

And as with all men and women who come to symbolise the aspirations of a nation, who represent, as it were, the voices calling for change, they made the supreme sacrifice. All of them were systematically, carefully picked up by the local collaborators of the Pakistan army and then ruthlessly picked off. Rayerbazar remains a testament to the sufferings of these brave Bengalis. It is also a reminder, in much the same way that Auschwitz and Buchenwald and Dachau are reminders, that the spirit of a nation is never snuffed out through the murder of its bravest and brightest. The spirit simply passes on to those who remain to carry the torch forward.

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## BANGLADESH: AN EPIC JOURNEY TO SELF-ASSERTION

It is this torch we have borne all these years since the liberation of Bangladesh on a December afternoon in 1971. Note that those who murdered these illustrious people have lived on, have even thrived at the expense of this free country. But they have lived in all the shame and opprobrium we have heaped on them for the deaths they brought to their own people. It matters little that these men, calling themselves Al-Badr and Al-Shams, have, through the years, aged and even made it back to society, thanks to the machinations of the many usurpers of power in this country. It matters not at all that these men have been part of government, have strutted about in the corridors of government.

What does matter is the way in which we have kept them at arm's length, have indeed reminded ourselves at every point that an association with quislings is essentially a betrayal of trust with those who gave their lives for a country in order for the rest of us to live in freedom. When individuals like Alim Chowdhury, Professor Ghyasuddin, Selina Perveen, Nizamuddin Ahmed, Shahidullah Kaiser and all those others marched to the dark passages of death on the eve of liberation, they only reinforced the message that nationhood acquires poignancy and a sense of being through the willingness of men and women to make the supreme sacrifice we call martyrdom.

Fifty-plus years after Bangladesh arrived in our lives, we bow in tribute to all these soldiers of freedom, all these individuals whose contributions, had they not been pushed to a gory death, would have strengthened our hold on destiny. As we remember them, as we recall the contributions they made to our lives when they lived, we are also assailed by all those questions and doubts that arise in men when they spot justice being on the run and the perpetrators of grisly crimes getting away with it all. In the early days of freedom, as the state of Bangladesh sought to solidify itself, it was the natural expectation that those who had committed war crimes would be dealt with in terms of the law. Let us not forget that three million Bengalis lay dead, two hundred thousand women stood divested of their dignity, and a whole geographical landscape lay witness to the horrendous crimes of the Pakistan army and the murderous elements it chose to call *razakars*.

It was these truths, and other truths, which ought to have been confronted head-on, through bringing to justice everyone who had involved himself in all such crimes against humanity. The crime of genocide is everywhere a sending out of a message that humanity has been debased, that human dignity has been torn to shreds, and so needs to be handled in the only way possible, through recourse to the law. There was the instance of Nuremberg before us. There were examples of how escaped Nazis were still being tracked down and brought to book in the early 1960s. In more recent times, instances of war crimes tribunals vis-à-vis the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Congo and Sierra Leone, as also the case against Myanmar over its genocide of Rohingyas at the International Court of Justice, remain a sign of how unwilling the civilised world remains about letting bygones be bygones.

In Bangladesh, despite all the evidence, all the written and oral testimony about the criminality of the occupation army and its collaborators, despite the enactment of a Collaborator's Act in 1972, the murderers of our intellectuals, indeed of Bengalis across the board, were to go untracked and unpunished. That sadness would then turn to horror when the nation's first military regime, headed by a freedom fighter, decided in its questionable wisdom to do away with the Collaborators' Act and allow former allies of the Pakistan army back into politics. By the early twenty-first century, some of these elements were in government. It was a moment of supreme irony: men who had, through kidnapping and murder, sought to put to the torch the idea of a free Bangladesh cheerfully relished the perks of power and authority in a land they had tried murdering through twisting the knife inside some of its most illustrious citizens.

We ask this morning, as we observe Independence Day, why things had to come to such a pass. The answer is easy to come by: one government after another has failed to uphold the heritage we so assiduously built in 1971. And there is more. The nation's political forces have, over the decades, squandered their energy in an unremitting, intense struggle for power without noticing that even as they engaged themselves in that sordid dash for the heights, it was the old enemies of freedom who organised themselves, solidified their fortress and made ready to renew their medieval assault on Bengali pride.

It all sends out a powerful, purposeful message to all Bengalis: it is time to turn around, face the enemy and send him packing through the woods he has so long inhabited. And that will be our way of paying tribute to the intellectuals who fell to the chicanery and depredations of the Pakistan army and its local collaborators only days before Pakistan died on the blood-soaked free land of Bangladesh.

As dawn breaks across Bangladesh today, we make a promise, to ourselves and to those who lived among us and then passed on to glory made eternal through dying for freedom — that we will redeem the past and reclaim our heritage through cleansing this land of the sinister shadows and cadaverous presence of those who once killed and raped and pillaged Bengal.

It is not too late for the wheels of justice to turn. It is never too late for the souls of patriots to rest content in the knowledge that their Sonar Bangla is in the safe and secure hands of their fellow Bengalis. A half century on, we do not forget.

### 6. December: the Twilight of Freedom

There will always be the question: Where were we when liberty came to our doorsteps, when news came of the surrender of the Pakistan army? For my generation, as also for the one before ours, it was a moment of sheer joy, interspersed, of course, with the sad thought that so much of repression, so much of killing had been perpetrated by the occupation army and its local collaborators in the months leading up to 16 December.

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And yet it was a new beginning on the afternoon of that day. It had been a quiet day, with people feeling that the surrender of the Pakistanis would take place anytime soon. Over the past few days, Indian air force planes have bombed Tejgaon airport, making it hard for any Pakistani aircraft or fighter jets to take off or land.

In any case, Pakistan's air force did not exist anymore, for its planes had been destroyed in Indian bombing. And, yes, the relentless bombing of Governor's House (today's Bangabhaban) had compelled puppet governor A.M. Malek and his ministers to take shelter at Hotel Intercontinental, which had meanwhile been designated a neutral zone under UN auspices. The governor had resigned.

Leaflets advising the Pakistan military to surrender had been dropped from Indian planes all across Dhaka. In Bengali and English, the leaflets assured the soldiers that they would be treated according to the rules of war, as prisoners, if they surrendered. We who were in the city recalled that only a couple of days earlier, General AAK Niazi, the Pakistani military commander, had boasted to foreign correspondents based in Dhaka that the Indians would take the city over his dead body.

That statement left citizens perturbed, for there was the fear that if Pakistan's soldiers did not surrender, the Indian army and the Mukti Bahini would launch a major assault on the city that could lead to a desperate response from the Pakistanis and hence much bloodletting. Dhaka would be razed to the ground. By the morning of 16 December, it was obvious that thousands of the city's residents had made their way out of it in order to stay out of the line of fire.

On 16 December, it had become clear that every town in occupied Bangladesh was being freed of Pakistani control one after another. Bangladesh flags were being raised in every liberated town, with citizens, all of whom had been in internal exile in the months since the military launched its genocide in March, cheerfully raising loud slogans of *Joi Bangla*. It would only be a matter of time before Dhaka would be liberated, forcing Niazi and his men to surrender to the joint command of Indian and Bangladesh forces. Ten days earlier, the Indian government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had accorded recognition to Bangladesh as a sovereign state. So had the Bhutan government.

At the United Nations Security Council, repeated attempts were made to have a ceasefire in place. Thankfully, though, the Soviet Union, exercising its right of veto as one of the five permanent members of the UNSC, strategically made sure that no ceasefire took effect until Pakistan had decisively been defeated in Bangladesh. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister by General Yahya Khan on 3 December, engaged in theatrics and at one point stormed out of the Security Council, tearing up a sheaf of papers in the process.

For those of us who stayed home on 16 December, the first intimations of the surrender of the Pakistan army came through full-throated slogans of *Joi Bangla* on the lanes, streets and roads of the neighbourhood and throughout the city. For the very first time since Tikka Khan and his fellow generals had initiated the genocide in March, we could hear *Joi Bangla* ringing loud and clear all across the city. It was a clear message for all of us — that Niazi and his soldiers had finally capitulated without a fight, that Bangladesh had emerged as an independent nation-state.

In those moments of inexpressible joy, thoughts of an incarcerated Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were in the minds of all Bengalis. The last that one had heard of him was in August, when the Yahya regime made the public announcement that he would be tried in a military court, in camera, on charges of waging war against Pakistan. On 16 December, even as we celebrated the thrill of freedom, we did not know if the Father of the Nation was alive or had secretly been executed by a brutal military regime in distant Rawalpindi. We prayed that he would be alive, that he was safe, that we would have him back in our midst soon.

In Delhi, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a true and trusted friend of Bengalis, a reputation which will endure for all time, informed a cheering Indian parliament that Dhaka was now the free capital of a free country. Here in the city, as those *Joi Bangla* slogans rose in a crescendo all around, it was time to tune in to Dhaka Radio. Over the preceding few days, it had been off air. Nothing was heard on it. But today, within minutes of the Pakistani surrender, it crackled back to life as Dhaka Betar, a refreshing change from Radio Pakistan.

There was no formal announcement of any programme. There was no anchor whose voice could be heard. Dhaka Betar simply opened through a recitation of the poem „*Aaj srishti shukher ullashe*“. Indeed, it was a moment of Creation, of rebirth, for a Bengali nation long suppressed, long a victim to the predatory instincts of alien forces outrageously intent on feeding off its resources.

Once the poetic recitation drew to an end, it was the voice of Abdul Jabbar, soothing and cheering and emotionally charged, which had tears of indescribable happiness flow from our eyes to suffuse our cheeks. He sang, „*Hajar bochhor pore / abar eshechhi phire / Banglar buuke achhi danrhiye*“. Yes, we had returned home, all of us, every one of us, to a land the enemy had sought to destroy through his scorched earth programme. Bangladesh, bruised and battered, was finally a free republic, de jure and ready to be part of the global community.

At the Race Course (today's Suhrawardy Udyan), where in March Bangabandhu had delivered his stirring call to freedom — *ebarer shongram amader muktir shongram, ebarer shongram shwadhinotar shongram* — Niazi affixed his signature to the document of surrender. He had been accompanied to the small table where the signing ceremony took place by General Jagjit Singh Aurora. Old pictures reveal our very own Major ATM Haider walking alongside the two generals as they make their way to the surrender spot.

On that declining afternoon, the brave freedom fighter Kader Siddiqui, who with his Kaderia Bahini had fought the Pakistanis inside Bangladesh, was also present to witness the surrender. Confronting Niazi, he refused to shake the

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general's hand. He was right to do so, for it was Niazi who had ominously served the warning that through the rape of Bengali women by his soldiers, the Pakistanis would change the generational nature of the Bengalis — *hum un ke nasal badal denge*.

On 16 December, as Bengalis celebrated the coming of freedom, what remained of Pakistan in the west was engulfed in deep sorrow. Yahya Khan was too inebriated to speak to his people over the radio and television. Strangely enough, as Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, a former Pakistani foreign minister, would years later recount in his work, "Neither a Hawk Nor a Dove", that on 16 December, Pakistani officials went around handing out, at a Rawalpindi hotel, to foreign journalists copies of a document relating to the country's projected constitution as envisaged by the regime.

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Over there in Dhaka, the Pakistan army had surrendered to the Indian army and the Mukti Bahini, and here was Yahya Khan dreaming up ideas of a constitution for a country half of which had broken away to become a separate state. Within minutes, though, those officials came back, requesting the journalists to return the copies they had been given earlier. Apparently, someone in the establishment had noted that a cataclysmic change had come over Pakistan.

That was 16 December for us. On the day, the Mujibnagar government decreed a ban on four political parties which had collaborated with the Pakistan army in the suppression of Bengalis. They were the Pakistan Muslim League, the Pakistan Democratic Party, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Nezam-e-Islam.

The leadership of the Mujibnagar government, headed by Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad, arrived in Dhaka from Calcutta to take charge of the administration on 22 December. On the same day, Pakistan's new President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had replaced Yahya Khan two days earlier, ordered the release of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from solitary confinement and had him placed under house arrest at a rest house outside Rawalpindi.

Bhutto turned up at the rest house the next day, surprising Bangabandhu and making it known to him that he was not only Pakistan's President but also Chief Martial Law Administrator. He carefully stayed away from informing Bangabandhu that Bangladesh had been liberated, and instead told him that the Indian army had occupied "East Pakistan". Bangladesh's leader, despite his long imprisonment, was wise enough to understand that a gigantic historic transformation had taken place in Pakistan's fortunes. Bhutto, on that day and again on 27 December, tried convincing Bangabandhu that some link, even a loose one, should be kept between what he called the two wings of Pakistan. Bangabandhu remained unmoved.

On 8 January 1972, Bhutto accompanied Bangabandhu and Dr Kamal Hossain, who had been detained in Haripur prison since his arrest in April, to Chaklala airport in Rawalpindi. The Pakistani and Bangladeshi leaders bade farewell to each other, following which a special aircraft of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) took off from Rawalpindi for London with Bangabandhu and Kamal Hossain and Hossain's family on board.

On 10 January 1972, the Father of the Nation returned to a free Bangladesh, completing his long-sought struggle for independence. At last, our freedom was whole, and Bangladesh stood before us as a beloved homeland—sovereign, beautiful, and ours to cherish.

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# THE ECONOMICS OF INDEPENDENCE

Dr. Mamunur Rashid\*

Freedom is intoxicating. But freedom without economic sovereignty is just a beautiful cage with an open door. When Bangladesh declared independence in 1971, its people weren't only fighting for a flag or a border — they were fighting for the right to decide where their money went, what their land produced, and who their economy served. Under West Pakistan's shadow, East Pakistanis watched helplessly as their resources were siphoned away to fund a government that viewed them as a colony. They contributed the majority of Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings — yet received barely a third back. That isn't just unfair. It's economic warfare.

So they fought. And they won.

What they won, however, was only half the battle.

The first 25 years of Bangladesh's independence tell a sobering story. The dream of the freedom fighters — a free, equitable economy for the masses — was hijacked not by foreign invaders, but by a far more insidious enemy: a domestic coalition of elites who had little to gain from a government that actually served ordinary people. Three groups formed this unlikely alliance: military officers who had returned from Pakistan, Islamic political parties, and business elites with deep ties to the old order. Their shared interest wasn't ideology — it was self-preservation. A truly independent, people-first economy threatened all of them. So they worked, often in tandem, to ensure it never fully arrived.

The assassination of Bongobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — the father of the nation — in 1975 was the turning point. With him went the promise of a socialist economic foundation. What followed was decades of institutionalised looting, dressed up as governance. An indemnity law even shielded his killers from prosecution, a breathtaking signal of who was now in charge.

A myth worth confronting head-on: critics — many of them aligned with anti-Bangladesh interests — have long claimed that Bongobondhu's government stumbled immediately, pointing to the devastating 1974 famine as proof of corruption and incompetence.

The numbers disagree. Bangladesh recorded its highest GDP growth rate in 1973-74 (Bangladesh experienced a significant economic rebound in 1974 with a GDP growth rate of 9.59% from a GDP growth rate of approximately -13.97% in 1972), under Bongobondhu's leadership. The famine had roots in something historians have gradually acknowledged: an international climate hostile to yet another socialist-leaning government in Asia, compounded by deliberate disruptions to supply chains from Western-aligned nations. Famine as geopolitics — it is a darker story than the simple narrative of mismanagement.

Fast forward to 2009. Awami League returned with a mandate and, crucially, with a pragmatic clarity about what the country actually needed.

Sheikh Hasina's government made a decision that was bold precisely because it was quiet: they abandoned the rigid socialist economic framework of the constitution's founding pillars — not by tearing those pillars down, but by building something new between them. The model they embraced could be called *Capitalist Nationalism* — state control of strategic assets, with the energy and innovation of the private sector invited in to do what states rarely do well: move fast, compete, and grow.

This wasn't betrayal. It was evolution. China made the same pivot in 1978. Vietnam followed. Both are now economic powerhouses. The ideological purity of socialism, it turns out, feeds people far less reliably than a pragmatic hybrid that borrows the best of both worlds.

The results for Bangladesh were real. Poverty fell. Exports surged. A new economic identity emerged — one the world began to take seriously.

But here is where the story turns cautionary again.

Growth, sustained long enough, eventually hits a ceiling. Bangladesh's economy reached that ceiling around 2018-19. At that moment, the smartest move would have been to shift gears — from a *growth narrative* to a *public-service narrative*. This is precisely the transition developed economies made after their own industrial booms: using the

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wealth generated by growth to build institutions, deliver services, and demonstrate to citizens that the state was a trustworthy partner in their lives.

Awami League missed that window.

Rather than pivoting, the government held its position — and a policy posture that had been bold in 2009 began to look rigid and self-serving by 2019. Corruption, which had never been fully excised, became more visible. The three elite groups, now wealthier and more organised than ever, exploited the frustration. The propaganda machine whirred into action. And a government that had genuinely transformed Bangladesh found itself losing the narrative war to forces who had never wanted Bangladesh to succeed in the first place.

So where does that leave the economics of independence today?

The founding vision — *freedom of economic choices for all Bangladeshis* — has not expired. It simply needs a new vehicle.

The four pillars of the constitution don't need to be demolished. They need to be reinterpreted for the present moment, the same way every living democracy periodically rereads its founding documents through the lens of current reality. The public-service shift isn't a retreat from independence — it is its fullest expression. A state that delivers healthcare, education, and economic security to its citizens is a state that has truly made good on the promise of 1971.

Venezuela clung to ideology and collapsed. Cuba clung to ideology and stagnated. China adapted and soared. Vietnam adapted and grew. India adapted — imperfectly, chaotically, but unmistakably forward.

The question is no longer whether Bangladesh *can* make this shift.

The question is whether it will have the courage to.

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***Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are solely the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of any institution to which the author is affiliated.***



# WOMEN'S (DIS)EMPOWERMENT UNDER THE YUNUS ADMINISTRATION: THE MIRAGE OF GENDER PROGRESS ON THE 56TH INDEPENDENCE DAY OF BANGLADESH

Dr J M Chowdhury\*

## 1. Women's Empowerment: Historical Context and Spurious Political Assertion

In September 2025 at the UN General Assembly, Professor Yunus explicitly stated that women's empowerment was a top priority and outlined national efforts toward it, including policy commitments intended to enhance women's rights and participation (1). As we know, Women's Empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices, access resources, exercise agency, and participate fully in political, social, and economic decision-making, both within the household and in public life (2). It encompasses multiple dimensions, including autonomy, education, economic independence, political participation, and freedom from violence or discrimination (3). In the context of Bangladesh, the notion of women's empowerment is deeply intertwined with the country's struggle for independence in 1971. The Liberation War not only symbolised national self-determination but also recognised women as active agents of social and political transformation (4). Women participated as fighters, organisers, and supporters, demonstrating their capacity to influence the trajectory of the nation.

Bangladesh's independence in 1971 was celebrated as a triumph of self-determination, democracy, and social justice, a vision that promised equality and dignity for all citizens, including women. From the outset, the liberation struggle recognised women as active agents, both on the battlefield and in civil society, symbolising their potential to shape the nation's political, economic, and social future. The founding ideals of Bangladesh, enshrined in the 1972 Constitution, nationalism, democracy, secularism, and social justice, explicitly recognised gender equality as central to nation-building. Article 10 emphasises the "fundamental principles of state policy" to ensure equal opportunity and social justice for all citizens (5). Article 28(1) guarantees that "all citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law" (6), while Article 28(2) specifically prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex (7). Furthermore, Article 11 underscores the state's responsibility to promote welfare measures that enhance the standard of living and social position of women (8).

Collectively, these provisions reflect a constitutional commitment to women's empowerment as integral to the vision of a newly independent Bangladesh (9). Yet, more than five decades after independence, the notion of women's empowerment in Bangladesh remains ambivalently realised. During Sheikh Hasina's tenure, the country recorded notable progress: female literacy rose from 52% in 2000 to over 73% by 2023 (10), and women's participation in the national parliament reached over 21% in reserved seats in 2023 (11).

### Box 1: Methodology for determining women's empowerment in the Global Gender Gap Index

Women's empowerment is often measured using **composite indices** that combine several different aspects of social, economic, and political life. One widely used measure is the **Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)** produced by the World Economic Forum. This index looks at four main areas, or **sub-indices**:

1. **Economic Participation and Opportunity** – measures women's access to jobs, equal pay, and leadership positions.
2. **Educational Attainment** – compares the number of women and men who can read, write, and attend school at different levels.
3. **Health and Survival** – considers life expectancy and sex ratios to see if women and men are equally healthy and safe.
4. **Political Empowerment** – measures women's representation in parliament, ministerial positions, and other political offices.

Each area receives a score between 0% and 100%, where 100% indicates complete parity with men. The scores are then **combined to produce an overall index**, which provides a snapshot of gender equality and women's empowerment in a given country.

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (12)

The Global Gender Gap Index ranked Bangladesh 65th globally in 2023 (13). Despite a sudden rise to 24th position in 2025, the highest in South Asia and indicative of notable statistical gains in women's empowerment, most sub-index values exhibit only marginal or negligible change, with the exception of women's political empowerment (14). Moreover, following Sheikh

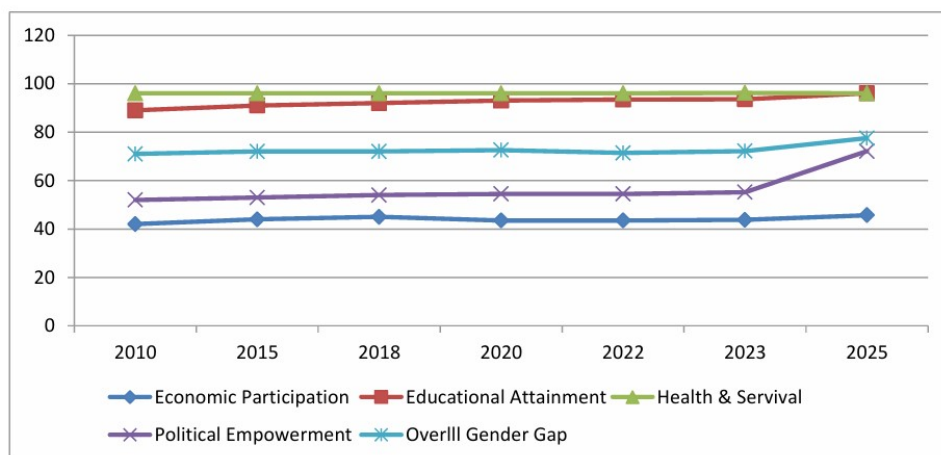
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Hasina’s exile in 2024, a couple of indicators suggest a reversal in this trajectory.

Pertinently, gender-based violence, harassment of women activists, and socio-political marginalisation of women have risen sharply (15).

**Figure 1: Women’s Empowerment Index and Sub-Indices: No Significant Change after Sheikh Hasina**



This article delves deep into this paradox by examining women’s empowerment under the Yunus Administration, demonstrating how apparent gains in women's empowerment through political participation may conceal a fragile and contested landscape, where the ideals of our independence in 1971 are yet to be fully realised, yet reversed, in the everyday lives of Bangladeshi women.

### 2. Women's Empowerment under the Yunus Regime: The Illusion of a False Paradigm

Interestingly, between 2023 and 2025, Bangladesh’s overall ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index improved significantly, reflecting higher scores in political representation and other measured dimensions of gender parity (16). At first glance, the inclusion of women in the Yunus-led interim administration appears to signal progress in gender empowerment (17). However, this apparent improvement does not reflect any sustained advancement in the status, autonomy, or social position of women in Bangladesh. Rather, it is largely the result of a one-time political decision to appoint women to visible positions within the interim government, creating a superficial impression of empowerment. While such appointments were publicly lauded, they did not translate into broader structural changes, nor did they address persistent barriers in economic participation, political agency, or protection against gender-based violence (18). Consequently, the gains under the Yunus regime constitute a false paradigm, a statistical or symbolic improvement that masks the continued fragility of women’s rights and social status in the country.

**Table 1: Comparative Sub-Index Analysis of Women’s Empowerment across the Sheikh Hasina and Yunus Regimes**

Sub-index	2023 Score	2025 Score	Trend & Interpretation
<b>Economic Participation &amp; Opportunity</b>	43.8%	45.7%	Change +1.9%; slow improvement, but still substantially discriminatory.
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	93.6%	96.0%	Change +2.4%; positive trend, but limited translation into economic outcomes.
<b>Health &amp; Survival</b>	96.2%	96.0%	Change -0.2%; near-parity, but not comprehensive of all health inequalities
<b>Political Empowerment</b>	55.2% (Moderate-high)	72.1% (Significantly higher)	Official gains in representation metrics, but may mask deeper political exclusion.

Source: World Economic Forum (19)

As indicated earlier in Figure 1, the sub-index analysis highlights that while Bangladesh’s overall women empowerment scores improved between 2023 and 2025, the gains under the Yunus-led interim administration were not indicative of sustained progress across all dimensions. Economic Participation & Opportunity remained extremely low, increasing only marginally from 43.8% to 45.7%, signalling persistent discrimination in labour force participation, income equality, and leadership roles. Educational Attainment continued to be near parity (93.6% to 96.0%), reflecting long-standing improvements under Sheikh Hasina’s tenure, but these gains did not translate into corresponding economic or social empowerment. Health & Survival remained stable

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at 96%, suggesting that access to basic healthcare and survival outcomes were largely unchanged. In contrast, Political Empowerment showed a substantial increase from 55.2% to 72.1%, largely driven by the one-time decision to appoint women to visible positions within the Yunus interim administration, including ministerial roles counted in the Global Gender Gap Index. While this created the appearance of progress, it did not address structural exclusion or grassroots political participation, nor did it improve women's autonomy, safety, or broader socio-economic opportunities. Therefore, the apparent overall improvement is largely superficial, reflecting statistical gains rather than substantive empowerment, and underscores the fragility of women's rights under the interim regime.

Violence against women remains one of the most significant indicators of gender vulnerability, as it directly undermines women's physical security, psychological well-being, and ability to participate freely in social, economic, and political life. Gender-based violence not only reflects deeply rooted structural inequalities but also perpetuates women's marginalisation by restricting their mobility, autonomy, and access to opportunities (20). Recent reports indicate that violence against women in Bangladesh increased during 2025, with human rights organisations documenting a rise in rape, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based violence compared with previous years (21). At the same time, national survey data reveal that violence against women remains widespread in the country, with approximately three out of four women reporting having experienced some form of intimate partner violence during their lifetime, highlighting the systemic nature of the problem (22). Such trends demonstrate that women's vulnerability cannot be assessed solely through formal indicators of representation or participation; rather, the prevalence of violence provides a crucial measure of whether women can exercise their rights and freedoms safely within society.

**Table 2: Comparative Indicators of Violence against Women between 2023 and 2025**

Indicator	2023	2025	Trend / Observation
<b>Reported rape cases</b>	573 cases documented by ASK	786 rape victims recorded by Bangladesh Mahila Parishad	An increase of roughly 37–40%, indicating worsening sexual violence
<b>Total incidents of violence against women and children</b>	Approx. 2,400+ incidents reported by rights organisations	2,851 victims of violence, abuse, and harassment documented	A clear increase in gender-based violence
<b>Victims who were minors (rape cases)</b>	Significant proportion but lower numbers	543 of the rape victims were children	Growing vulnerability of girls
<b>Domestic violence / physical abuse cases</b>	507 reported victims in monitoring reports	Approx. 640–650 documented cases of domestic or family-based violence in rights-group monitoring	Increase in household-level violence.
<b>Monthly snapshot of violence</b>	Typically, 150–200 victims are reported monthly	For example, 442 women and girls suffered violence in March 2025 alone	Indicates continuing high frequency of incidents

Source: The Business Standards, several issues (23)

The comparison between 2023 and 2025 reveals several important patterns. Firstly, Sexual violence has risen significantly, with rape cases increasing to 786 in 2025, a sharp escalation compared with earlier years. Secondly, Domestic and household violence remains widespread, demonstrating that women's insecurity persists even within private spaces. Thirdly, Overall incidents of violence against women increased to nearly 2,900 documented cases in 2025, suggesting a deterioration in gender security. Fourthly, Girls constitute the majority of victims, highlighting the structural vulnerability of minors within the current social environment. A similar trend is observed from World Bank data regarding the vulnerability of women in getting formal sector jobs.

### 3. (Dis)empowerment through Employment: Gendered Exposure to Precarious Work

Employment is widely recognised as one of the most important pathways to women's empowerment because it provides not only income but also economic independence, social mobility, and greater participation in decision-making within households and society (24). Access to decent and secure employment enables women to exercise autonomy over their lives, reduces dependence on patriarchal family structures, and strengthens their capacity to claim social, eco-

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conomic, and political rights (25). Conversely, limited access to stable employment often reinforces existing gender inequalities by confining women to economically dependent roles and restricting opportunities for personal and professional advancement (26). In developing economies such as Bangladesh, the quality and security of employment are therefore as important as labour market participation itself. While increasing numbers of women have entered the workforce in recent decades, a large proportion remain concentrated in low-paid, informal, and vulnerable forms of employment, characterised by limited legal protection, job insecurity, and minimal prospects for career advancement (27). Consequently, the mere presence of women in the labour market does not automatically translate into genuine empowerment; rather, the nature and stability of employment determine whether labour market participation truly enhances women's socio-economic status (28).

**Table 3: Trends in Women's Economic Empowerment in Bangladesh: World Bank Data for 2023 and 2025**

Indicator (World Bank)	2023	2025 / Latest Available	Interpretation
Female Labour Force Participation (% of women 15+)	43.7%	44.1% (2024–25 estimate)	Very small increase; participation remains low compared with global averages
Women outside the labour force (increase)	Baseline	2.4 million additional women outside the labour force	Indicates worsening employment participation
National Poverty Rate	20.5%	21.2% (2025)	Rising poverty
Youth Female Labour Participation (15–24)	48.5% (2024)	46.3%	disproportionately affects women Decline among young women
Women in the Informal Economy	High share	The informal sector accounts for 85% of employment	Women are concentrated more in vulnerable jobs

Source: World Bank labour and development data.

A comparison of gender-related indicators from the World Bank data for 2023 and 2025 reveals no substantial structural improvement in women's socio-economic conditions in Bangladesh. Female labour force participation increased only marginally, while millions of women exited the labour market and youth participation among women declined. Rising poverty levels and the continued dominance of informal employment further indicate persistent structural barriers to women's economic empowerment. These trends suggest that the apparent improvement in gender-empowerment rankings during the same period cannot be attributed to meaningful improvements in women's socio-economic conditions, but rather to changes in political representation and statistical measurements.

#### 4. Alleged Women's Empowerment under the Yunus Regime: The Disentangling of Myth from Reality

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This study demonstrates that the apparent improvement in women's empowerment indicators in Bangladesh during 2025 should be interpreted with considerable caution. While international indices suggest a notable rise in the overall gender parity score, particularly in the political empowerment sub-index, a closer examination reveals that this progress is largely statistical and symbolic rather than structural.

Evidence drawn from employment indicators and development data further reinforces this conclusion. Women's participation in the labour market remains overwhelmingly concentrated in informal, low-paid, and vulnerable forms of employment, conditions that offer little economic security and severely limit opportunities for upward mobility. At the same time, rising reports of violence against women underscore the persistence of deep-rooted threats to women's safety and autonomy, revealing that the structural foundations necessary for genuine empowerment remain profoundly fragile. Taken together, these realities make it clear that improvements in representation or statistical rankings are, at best, superficial and do not translate into meaningful or sustained gains in women's everyday lives.

It is therefore, in mid-February 2026, just one month before the 56th Independence Day of Bangladesh, while delivering his farewell address at the conclusion of his interim government, Muhammad Yunus failed to mention of any definitive progress in women's empowerment during his tenure.

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# BROKEN PROMISE AND PARADOX OF JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE IN BANGLADESH

Tapos Kumar Das\*

## Introduction

Weaponizing the criminal justice system for political vendetta, personal revenge, or benefit was never alien to Bangladesh. Since independence, successive governments - both elected and unelected alike - have repeatedly instrumentalized justice mechanisms to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and silence political opposition. Against this backdrop, the July 2024 uprising, which promised systemic transformation, prompted an important inquiry: did it meaningfully alter the institutional culture or the individual attitudes governing the administration of criminal justice?

An investigative report published by Prothom Alo on 16 March 2026 projects that this promise of change remains largely illusory (1). The report reveals a continuing, and in some instances, worsening cycle of fabricated cases sustained by opportunistic actors. According to the Bangladesh Police, a total of 1,841 criminal cases, including 791 murder allegations, were filed in connection with the July uprising (2). However, the fact-finding investigation into a sample of 100 of these cases drew a deeply troubling scenario: many of the cases were deliberately fabricated, driven by personal enmity, business or professional rivalry, attempts at property grabbing, extortion, or sheer harassment. False accusations against a large number of named and unnamed persons not only shadowed the criminality of actual offenders but also created a fertile environment for bribery and extortion (3). Both fraudulent complainants and investigators exploited this environment, turning the criminal process into a bargaining tool rather than a pathway to justice (4). While legal extortion through fake cases remains an old practice now wielded by new actors, one may wonder if the judiciary has a role to play in reversing this trend (5).

Bangladesh emerged as a nation with a solemn resolve to uphold the rule of law and to guarantee fundamental human rights, freedoms, equality, and justice for every citizen (6). Corresponding constitutional and institutional frameworks had also been made to realize these aspirations. Although the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary share responsibility for fulfilling the constitutional promises, practice has often diverged from principle: successive executives have acted in ways perceived as oppressive and contrary to popular interests; the legislature has been largely inert in addressing public concerns; and the judiciary has at times adopted positions that appear opportunistic rather than principled. Against this backdrop, and while acknowledging the shared obligations of all, this analysis focuses on the judiciary, revisiting the mutuality between judicial independence and public confidence, and examining whether the institutional and decisional independence of judges leverages the constitutional mandate for equality and justice.

## Broken Promise?

Separation of the judiciary from the executive was one of the Constitution's original pledges (7). Lessons from the colonial and pre-independence weaponization of the judiciary made clear that this commitment was far more than rhetorical. The brilliant legal minds who framed the Bangladesh Constitution envisioned the judiciary as the guardian of individual freedom against executive overreach (8). Yet, in practice, post-independence regimes, elected and unelected alike, consolidated power and obstructed efforts to effect separation (9).

What the executive declined to do, the judiciary, however, pursued through its own processes. After a prolonged legal struggle, the Supreme Court issued a landmark judgment directing the government to fulfil its constitutional mandate to separate judicial power (10). Implementation, however, was significantly delayed; only on 1 November 2007 did the then-caretaker government, by gazette notification, separate the judicial magistracy from the executive organ of the state. Also, the complementary legislation established the institutional framework of the judicial service, including rules governing judicial appointment and remuneration (11). To further the reforms, another interim government in 2025 established an independent secretariat for the Supreme Court, lessening the highest judiciary's institutional dependence on the Ministry of Law (12).

With an independent Supreme Court secretariat and its clearly delineated subordinate courts, the judiciary in Bangladesh is often described as having achieved a considerable degree of institutional independence. Yet, Judge Mazdar Hossain, who led the historic legal battle for judicial separation, laments, seventeen years after separation, that "although the judiciary is independent on paper, it has not fulfilled our expectations" (13). His assessment is echoed by Justice Moinul Islam Chowdhury, underscoring a persistent gap between formal guarantees and the effective autonomy needed to realize judicial independence. To Justice Chowdhury:

Judiciary's key characteristic is its accessibility, and it should work transparently to monitor the executive and legislative branches. Judicial harassment is one of the worst scenarios for justice (14).

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Observations from Justice Chowdhury and Judge Hossain provoke the longstanding academic debates about whether institutional independence alone is sufficient to secure the functional independence of judges, and whether judicial harassment stems from shortcomings in institutional safeguards or from lapses in the decisional independence of individual judges.

### Paradox of Judicial Independence

Despite some overlap among them, three forms of judicial independence - institutional, personal, and functional - are frequently referenced when assessing the qualitative capacity of the judiciary and its personnel. At home and abroad, there is a broader academic consensus that the institutional or structural independence of the judiciary depends to varying degrees on the separation of powers, administrative autonomy, and mechanisms of self-governance (15). Personal independence, by contrast, rests on security of tenure and financial security (16). Finally, the functional or decisional independence of judges depends on their ability to adjudicate without external pressure, independence from peers, and a guarantee of personal immunity (17).

Judicial independence carries with it a corresponding obligation for accountability. Shimon Shetreet observes that, for the legitimacy and public acceptance of judicial decisions, an effective and transparent mechanism for the accountability of judges is essential (18). Judicial accountability, in turn, has a ripple effect on the efficient performance of individual judges. In Bangladesh, there exists a historical tendency to control the judiciary through formal and informal accountability measures. Formal accountability, though not without reservations, is generally less controversial as it is public, predictable, and procedural. Informal accountability, by contrast, is unpredictable, unguarded, and often manifests as personal communication, peer pressure, public criticism, and other forms.

Around the globe, accountability for Supreme Court judges is widely enforced through the Supreme Judicial Council or Parliamentary proceedings. After experimenting with both systems, Bangladesh settled on the Supreme Judicial Council, comprising the Chief Justice and the next two senior-most Appellate Division judges (19). For subordinate court judges, accountability involves investigations by the Law Ministry and a final decision by the Supreme Court (20). Speaking summarily, Bangladesh employs formal accountability mechanisms that uphold the Supreme Court's primacy while preserving institutional and personal independence.

In the post-July uprising, state-sponsored mobocracy emerged as a new informal tool for controlling the judiciary. The resignation of the Chief Justice and senior judges of the Supreme Court under the mobsters' ultimatum is unprecedented in national history, riddling the institutional and personal independence of judges (21). Seizure of the court premises or pressure on judicial personnel impaired their decisional independence, leading them to be selective in taking cognizance of criminal cases or in providing interim relief (22). This perceived selectivity has left victims of fabricated cases more vulnerable and has eroded public confidence in an independent and principled judiciary.

Admittedly, the judiciary is the weakest organ of the state; it holds neither the sword nor the purse (23). Its strength derives primarily from public confidence in its functioning (24). "The judiciary loses public trust if it is perceived as lacking independence" (25). Evidently, a range of legal and institutional arrangements, such as a merit-based and independent appointment process for the subordinate judiciary, a separate pay scale, functional immunity, security of tenure for judges at all levels, and an independent secretariat for the Supreme Court, have significantly advanced the institutional and personal safeguards for judges. Nevertheless, decisional independence remains fundamentally an individual attribute. It is largely a state of mind, shaped by a judge's personal qualities, ethical commitment, and volition, and it cannot be fully guaranteed by laws or institutions alone (26).

Until February 2026, the police have submitted a total of 130 charge sheets in the July uprising cases; finding no criminality, their interim investigation cleared 4,285 names in relation to 638 criminal cases (27). Did courts grant bail or discharge these accused persons upon clearance by police reports? Have courts or prosecutions initiated any proceedings under section 211 of the Penal Code 1860 for the offense of false charges? Do criminal courts exercise bail jurisdiction consistently and in line with established legal principles? Answers to these questions might be instrumental in assessing the extent of decisional independence the individual judges have asserted in dispensing justice to the victims of fake cases.

### Concluding Remark

Evidently, the historical neglect of section 211 proceedings by the criminal courts and prosecutions has incentivized the culture of malicious prosecution in Bangladesh. Moreover, public confidence in the judiciary is seriously eroded by their apparent unequal treatment, such as granting bail to one accused hours after a remand order (28) while denying funeral parole or bail to another seeking a final farewell to a loved one (29).

Aside from collusion among fraudulent complainants, the police, and the prosecution, the widespread proliferation of fabricat-

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ed cases is largely attributable to the routine failure to apply the judicial mind when taking cognizance of criminal proceedings. It is true that “when the credibility of all institutions appears to have eroded, we cannot ignore the reality that the image of the judiciary is also tarnished to a substantial extent” (30). Yet, in a context of rejuvenated democracy and renewed public expectation, the judiciary cannot remain dormant while thousands of victims of fake accusations languish in jail. The courts are not expected to perform miracles; rather, faithfully discharging the duties they are sworn and compensated to perform suffices to counter the entrenched culture of malicious prosecution that has flourished amid judicial paralysis.

The constitutional guarantees of the rule of law, equality, and justice are not merely fundamental rights of citizens; they also impose binding obligations on all branches of the state to secure these guarantees for citizens. As the guardian of the Constitution, the protector of individual rights, and the last resort for redress, the judiciary carries the primary responsibility for upholding these principles. Having said so, this write-up concludes with a wake-up call to the Law Minister, the Chief Justice, and the Attorney General to recognize an urgent truth that “nothing is more corrosive of public confidence in the administration of justice than the belief that criminal justice is administered unequally” (31).

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# TARGETED FOR DESTRUCTION: THE HINDU GENOCIDE WITHIN THE BROADER ATROCITIES OF BANGLADESH, 1971

Tapas Kanti Baul\*

## Introduction

March 2026 is quite different from the previous years. Since 5 August 2024, the people in Bangladesh have been living in a lot of fear due to planned mob attacks orchestrated by the radical right-wing Islamic political forces, e.g. Jamat-e-Islami, Hefajat-e-Islam, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, etc. The fear further increased when the people witnessed Yunus government were facilitating the mob attacks and providing blanket impunity to those criminals who committed and master minded those attacks. Together with these physical attacks, continuous threat from the Yunus government and its cohorts to replace the constitution, the national anthem and the history, which gave the sense of losing the essence of independence at the hands of the right-wing political parties. People witnessed in agony that the judiciary is siding with those criminals and has become a puppet in the hands of the Yunus government and their allies. However, in 2026, two different positive incidents took place.

The first one is a US congressman, Greg Landsman, who submitted a resolution before the House of Congress for the recognition of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh. The second one is Melaghor, a group of online activists from Bangladesh, has drafted a Bangladesh Shanad, which has a list of pro-1971 aspirations which the future generation will pursue to achieve. The first aspiration of that Shanad is dedicated to the recognition of the 1971 genocide. All the events will work as a beacon of hope against the rise of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh, which is threatening the high ideals of the war of Independence, i.e. nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism.

As Bangladeshis, we know that genocide was committed in Bangladesh in 1971 during the war of Independence. Both the Pakistan army and their local auxiliary forces, e.g. razakars, peace committees (locally known as shanti komiti), al badr, al-shams, al-mujahid, etc., committed genocide. The local collaborators were made up of political leaders and activists of right-wing political parties like Jamat E Islami, Nizam E Islami and three factions of the Muslim League.

Pakistan army, together with their local collaborators, targeted three groups of people, i.e. Bengalees for their nationality, Awami League leaders and activists for their political identity and Hindu people for their religious identity. The article will focus on the genocide committed against the Hindu people of Bangladesh. The essay will highlight why they were targeted by the Pakistan army in 1971, and the design of that genocide. The essay used the International Crimes Tribunals (ICTBD) judgments pronounced before 5 August 2024 as a source of information and findings.

## 2. Why Did the Pakistan Army and Its Local Collaborators Targeted Hindu Populace in 1971?

In 1971, Hindus were minorities. During the 1971 Liberation War, the Pakistan 1 Army and its local collaborators—principally the Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams, and Peace Committees—systematically targeted Hindus because they were perceived as a collective enemy embodying Bengali nationalism, Indian influence, and support for the independence movement. Pakistani military doctrine and contemporaneous diplomatic records demonstrate that Hindus were viewed as politically disloyal, racially inferior, and inherently separatist, often conflated with India and the Awami League, which had overwhelmingly won the 1970 elections in East Pakistan.

ICT-BD judgments repeatedly show that local collaborators deliberately identified Hindu homes, villages, and institutions for destruction, assisting the army in massacres, deportation, looting, forced conversion, and genocidal rape—acts carried out with the intent to destroy the Hindu religious group in whole or in part, as judicially established in cases such as Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, A.T.M. Azharul Islam, and Md. Reaz Uddin Fakir. Independent observers at the time, including U.S. Consul General Archer Blood, reported the —naked, calculated and widespread selection of Hindus for special treatment, noting their systematic slaughter, expulsion, and marking for identification, a pattern later corroborated by scholarly and institutional research.

Thus, anti-Hindu violence in 1971 was not incidental to war but a core component of a broader genocidal policy aimed at breaking the social, cultural, and political foundations of Bengali resistance and securing Pakistan's domination through demographic terror and ethnic cleansing.

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### 3. Patterns of Hindu Genocide in 1971

#### 3.1 Selective Killing of Hindus Based on Religious Identity

A consistent pattern across 1971 was the selective killing of Hindu civilians because they were Hindus, often identified by local collaborators and segregated before execution.

On the night of 25 March 1971, as part of Operation Searchlight, the Pakistan Army, aided by local collaborators from the Peace Committee, Razakar, Al-Badr and Islami Chhatra Sangha, carried out religiously targeted killings of Hindu students at Jagannath Hall, Dhaka University, and Hindu families in Old Dhaka. Jagannath Hall, a predominantly Hindu residential hall, was surrounded and stormed; students were dragged out of rooms, shot at point-blank range, and their bodies piled in the courtyard. Sajjad Zaheer, a survivor, later testified that Hindu students were singled out and killed while Muslim students were ordered to recite *kalema* to prove loyalty (A Night of Darkness, 1999). Salima Begum, an Old Dhaka resident, recalled in her memoir that soldiers and local guides went —from door to door marking Hindu houses, looting them first and then setting them on fire after the men were killed (Ekattorer Smriti, 2001).

Ashrafuzzaman Khan records that from the very start of the crackdown, the occupation forces and collaborators acted on —a designed plan to arrest and kill civilians belonging to the Hindu community and students, noting that religious identity was a primary marker for selection (ICT-BD, Judgment, 2013). The same judgment further observes that Hindu teachers and intellectuals of Dhaka University were deliberately marked for future elimination, forming what later became the systematic December —intellectual killings, stating that “they were killed not for any battlefield role, but because they symbolized Bengali culture, secular thought, and were perceived as pro-Indian and Hindu-influenced” (ICT-BD, Chowdhury Mueen Uddin & Ashrafuzzaman Khan, 2013).

This targeting pattern is reinforced in *Chief Prosecutor v. A.T.M. Azharul Islam*, where the Tribunal held that Pakistani forces and their auxiliaries began identifying Hindu teachers, professors, and students from March 1971 onward, concluding that “individuals belonging to the Hindu religious group and the intelligentsia were singled out as a group for destruction” (ICT-BD, A.T.M. Azharul Islam, 2014).

Survivor and journalist Anisuzzaman’s memoir corroborates this judicial finding, recalling that after the Jagannath Hall massacre, —the university was turned into a hunting ground for Hindu teachers; their houses were watched, their names written down, and their fate sealed (Smritir Andhare, 2004). Together, the eyewitness memoirs and the ICT-BD judgments establish that the killings at Jagannath Hall and Old Dhaka on 25 March 1971 were not incidental violence, but the opening act of a genocidal campaign that combined religious targeting, extermination of Hindu students, destruction of Hindu homes, and the systematic elimination of Hindu teachers and intellectuals.

All these accounts establish that the Pakistan Army treated Hindus as an —enemy population, associating them with India and Bengali nationalism. Hindu men were routinely rounded up, separated from Muslims, and summarily executed, a pattern judicially recognised in multiple ICT-BD genocide convictions (e.g., *Salauddin Quader Chowdhury*, *Syed Md. Hachhan*, *Abdul Jabbar Engineer*).

An estimated 3,000,000 people were killed during 1971; Hindus were disproportionately targeted, especially in border districts and Hindu-majority localities (*Rounaq Jahan*, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration, 1972*; *Bangladesh Genocide entry*). In the first three months alone, historians estimate over 25,000 Hindus were killed in targeted massacres (*Probir Kumar Sarker*, *Dhaka Tribune series, 2021*).

#### 3.2 Rape and Sexual Violence Against Hindu Women as a Genocidal Tool

Rape was used systematically, not opportunistically, and Hindu women were specifically handed over to Pakistani troops by collaborators, as documented in ICT-BD judgments.

ICT-BD legally recognised —genocidal rape in cases such as *Chief Prosecutor v. Md. Reaz Uddin Fakir*, holding that rape was committed with the intent to destroy the Hindu community, causing physical and psychological destruction. Pakistani soldiers and auxiliaries frequently abducted Hindu women, confined them in military camps, and subjected them to repeated rape, explicitly targeting them as members of a religious group.

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It is well-known that 200,000–400,000 women were raped during the war; a large proportion were Hindu women, especially in rural Hindu-dominated areas (Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 1975; Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh*, 2011). ICT-BD referred to rape as “a weapon rather than a bullet”, intended to destroy the community’s social fabric (ICT-BD 3 judgments, 2013–2018).

### 3.3 Mass Destruction of Hindu Houses, Businesses, and Livelihoods

Another hallmark of the genocide was systematic economic destruction targeting Hindus to force displacement and permanent removal. Hindu houses and shops were identified, looted, and burned—often after killings— by Pakistani troops assisted by Razakars and Peace Committees. ICT-BD cases consistently show Muslim neighbours were spared, reinforcing the religious selectivity of the attacks.

Entire Hindu villages such as Chuknagar (Khulna) and Dakra (Bagerhat) saw thousands killed and settlements razed in May 1971 (Muntasir Mamoon, *The Vanquished Generals and the Liberation War of Bangladesh*, 2000). Hundreds of thousands of Hindu families lost land and businesses, accelerating long-term demographic decline (Rounaq Jahan, 1972; Government of Bangladesh data).

### 3.4 Targeting and Destruction of Hindu Religious Institutions

Temples and places of worship were not collateral damage; they were deliberately attacked to humiliate and terrorise Hindu communities. Pakistani soldiers and auxiliaries burned temples, desecrated idols, and attacked Hindu religious gatherings, often after rounding up villagers. ICT-BD judgments classify these acts as religious persecution accompanying genocide, especially when followed by killings or forced flight.

Hundreds of temples were destroyed or damaged across East Pakistan in 1971 (Akmale Akhtar, *Genocide in Bangladesh 1971*, 2002). Edward Kennedy’s U.S. Senate report (*Crisis in South Asia*, 1971) noted systematic attacks on Hindu religious sites as part of the terror campaign.

### 3.5 Forced Deportation and Ethnic Cleansing of Hindus

Genocide was also executed through forced displacement, a key genocidal act under international law. Survivors of massacres were deliberately driven to flee to India, often after their male relatives were killed and property destroyed. Local collaborators explicitly urged Hindus to “go to India” and termed them as “*malauns*”—a language repeatedly cited in ICT-BD testimony. Statistics and sources reveal that 10 million refugees fled to India in 1971, of which 70–80% were Hindus (Sisson & Rose, *War and Secession*, 1990; Ravi Kalia, *Pakistan— From the Rhetoric of Democracy to the Rise of Militancy*, 1995). This engineered flight caused the Hindu population share to drop from ~28–30% (1947) to ~18% by 1971.

Across killings, rape, arson, religious destruction, and deportation, the evidence demonstrates a coherent genocidal pattern. Hindus were identified as a religious group, targeted because of that identity, and subjected to acts intended to destroy them in whole or in part—satisfying the legal definition of genocide as recognised by ICT-BD and international scholarship.

## 4. The Genocidal Pattern Complies with the International Standards

The aforesaid pattern demonstrates a coherent genocidal pattern that satisfies both Article II of the Genocide Convention (1948) and the Rome Statute Elements of Crimes (ICC, Article 6), as interpreted by international jurisprudence. It is 4 pertinent to mention that the Rome Statute will not apply to the incidents taking place in 1971, but it is considered in the essay to show that if the incidents had taken place after the coming into force of the Statute, even then, it would have qualified as genocide.

First, the selective killing of Hindus because of their religious identity constitutes *killing members of a protected group* under Article II(a) and Article 6(a) Rome Statute, where intent may be inferred from patterns of conduct rather than explicit orders, as affirmed in *Prosecutor v. Akayesu* (ICTR, Judgment, 2 September 1998) and *Prosecutor v. Krstić* (ICTY Appeals Judgment, 19 April 2004). Second, the systematic rape and sexual violence against Hindu women, documented as targeted and group-specific, meets Article II(b) (“causing serious bodily or mental harm”), with international courts recognising rape as a genocidal act when committed with group-destructive intent (*Akayesu*, ICTR, 2 September 1998; *Prosecutor v. Ntaganda*, ICC Trial Judgment, 8 July 2019). Third, the burning of Hindu homes, villages, temples, and economic structures, coupled with terrorisation and starvation, satisfies Article II(c) (“deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical

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destruction”), consistent with findings in *Krstić* (ICTY, 19 April 2004) and *Prosecutor v. Al Bashir* (ICC Pre-Trial Chamber II, Decision on Arrest Warrant, 12 July 2010), where forced displacement and destruction of livelihood were treated as genocidal conditions of life.

Fourth, the forced deportation of Hindus to India following massacres, framed by perpetrators as expulsion of an “enemy population”, reflects genocidal intent through ethnic cleansing as a method of destruction, a concept recognised as genocidal when accompanied by Article II acts (*Krstić*, ICTY, 2004; *Stakić*, ICTY Judgment, 31 July 2003). Finally, the targeting of Hindu teachers, students, and intellectuals—from Jagannath Hall to later “intellectual killings”—demonstrates specific intent (*dolus specialis*) to destroy the group’s capacity to exist culturally and biologically, an approach endorsed in *Akayesu* (1998) and reaffirmed by ICT-BD findings such as *Chief Prosecutor v. Chowdhury Mueen Uddin & Ashrafuzzaman Khan* (ICT-BD Judgment, 3 November 2013) and *Chief Prosecutor v. A.T.M. Azharul Islam* (ICT-BD Judgment, 30 December 2014). Taken together, these acts reveal a coordinated policy targeting Hindus as a protected religious group, fulfilling both the material elements and the mental element of intent to destroy, in whole or in part, as required by the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute.

### 5. Recommendations for International Recognition of the 1971 Genocide in Bangladesh

For meaningful international recognition of the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh, a coordinated, law-centred and evidence-driven strategy must be pursued that moves beyond moral appeals and situates the crimes firmly within the established framework of international criminal law. Bangladesh should formally compile and submit a comprehensive Genocide Dossier to the United Nations, drawing on the pre-5 August 2024 judgments of the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh (ICT-BD), contemporaneous diplomatic cables, refugee records, survivor testimonies, and scholarly documentation, clearly mapping the acts committed in 1971 onto Article II of the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute Elements of Crimes. This dossier should be tabled at the UN General Assembly through a friendly group of states, accompanied by a draft resolution recognising the 1971 atrocities as genocide, similar to precedents involving the Armenian, Rwandan, Srebrenica, and Yazidi genocides. Parallel engagement with UN Special Procedures—particularly the Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide and on Minority Issues—would anchor recognition within the UN’s institutional genocide-prevention mandate and help counter denialism by framing 1971 as a legally adjudicated genocide rather than a contested historical narrative.

At the same time, Bangladesh and its civil-society partners must internationalise recognition efforts through strategic parliamentary diplomacy and judicial referencing, particularly in jurisdictions where genocide recognition has followed legislative initiative. National parliaments in North America, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific should be approached with tailored briefing papers demonstrating how ICT-BD findings passed before 5 August 2024 meet international standards of proof and align with jurisprudence from the ICTR, ICTY, and ICC. Equally important is sustained engagement with academic institutions, genocide museums, and international legal associations to embed 1971 into the global canon of recognised genocides through curricula, conferences, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Recognition should further be framed as a victim-centred obligation of truth, memory, and non-recurrence, consistent with international law’s duty to prevent genocide and combat impunity. Only through this integrated legal, diplomatic, and knowledge-based approach can the international community correct the long-standing injustice of silence and fulfil its responsibility to acknowledge the genocide committed against the people of Bangladesh in 1971.

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## BANGABANDHU'S STRATEGIC PREPARATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Mirza Rakib\*

### Abstract

The independence of Bangladesh was not an accidental occurrence of nine months; it was the result of decades of diligent planning. This article documents the political evolution of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the 1940s to 1971, analysing how he moved from conventional activism to leading the clandestine revolutionary groups and organized armed resistance.

### The Genesis: The Inner Group (1947–1958)

Bangabandhu's trajectory toward sovereign independence was catalyzed in the years following Pakistan's inception, fueled primarily by the systemic economic exploitation of the East and the aggressive cultural hegemony that sought to suppress the Bengali language and identity. Despite being active in the Pakistan movement during his student life in the 1940s, he became disillusioned with the religious "Two-Nation Theory" within six months of Pakistan's formation. During this early period, a secret organization called the "Inner Group" (including members like Moazzem Ahmed Chowdhury, Faiz Ahmed, Kamruddin Ahmad, and Ruhul Quddus) began clandestine operations for liberation. In the early 1950s, this group maintained contact with Indian authorities and even secured an agreement for a secret transmitter in Meghalaya. They initially viewed Sheikh Mujib as their potential leader to be sent to London to organize an overseas movement [1].

### Identity and Protest: The Rise of Nationalism

A pivotal moment in establishing a distinct national identity occurred in 1956. When the Pakistani government moved to re-name East Bengal as "East Pakistan," Sheikh Mujib vehemently opposed it in the Constituent Assembly. He argued that "Bengal" had a unique history and tradition that could not be erased without the public's consent. During that same session, he warned the ruling elite that if they denied people constitutional methods of protest, during that very session, he cautioned the Pakistani ruling elite that if the oppression and exploitation of Bengalis did not cease, the people would be compelled to adopt 'unconventional methods' of resistance [2].

### Clandestine Resistance: The Liberation Front (1958–1961)

Following the imposition of martial law in 1958, Bangabandhu shifted toward more secret organizational work. 'East Bengal Liberation Front' was formed in Jamalpur. This group planned an armed struggle with slogans like "*East Bengal belongs to Bengalis; West Pakistanis, leave Bengal.*" In 1959, its leaders met with Jawaharlal Nehru; Bangabandhu, Suhrawardy, and Bhashani were fully aware of this meeting. 'Apurba Sangsad' was established in 1962. This group used cultural activities as a front for independence work. Its name was a code for "Provisional Government of East Bengal" ('A' for Asthayi, 'Pu' for Purba, 'Ba' for Banga, 'Sa' for Sarkar). There was a historic meeting with the Communist Party in 1961. According to prominent Communist leader Khoka Ray, Bangabandhu was actively dreaming of independence as early as 1961. In a secret meeting between the Awami League and the Communist Party in late 1961, Bangabandhu explicitly stated: "The way Punjab's 'Big Business' is exploiting and suppressing East Pakistan, we cannot stay with them. We must build a movement for an independent East Pakistan starting now." Although he temporarily stepped back from an immediate direct movement following advice from Moni Singh and Khoka Ray, he clarified his stance: "Brother, I accept your words for now... but my point remains" [1, 2, 3].

### Armed Preparations and the 'Nucleus' (1962–1964)

By 1961, Bangabandhu was openly discussing independence in secret meetings, arguing that the "Punjabi mindset" would never grant Bengalis their rights. In 1962, under Bangabandhu's authorization, three student leaders - Sirajul Alam Khan, Abdur Razzak, and Kazi Aref Ahmed formed the "Nucleus." Abdur Razzak handled member recruitment while Sirajul Alam Khan provided theoretical training. By 1964, the Nucleus had formed 10-member groups in every police station. When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman inquired about the progress of the Nucleus after his release from prison in 1969, he was informed that committees had already been formed in 200 police stations [2, 4].

### Connections with the Armed Forces and the Agartala Case (1962–1969)

Recognizing that independence required military strength, Bangabandhu began connecting with disgruntled Bengali officers in the Pakistani armed forces. In late 1962, at a secret meeting in Karachi, Bangabandhu met Navy Lt. Commander Moazzem Hossain and others, promising full support for an armed uprising. Bangabandhu secretly visited Agartala in early 1962 and

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again crossed the Belonia border into India in 1963-64 to discuss logistics for the struggle. These activities led to the 1968 case "State vs. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Others." On February 23, 1969, following a mass upsurge, he was acquitted and later honored with the title 'Bangabandhu', which was officially announced by Tofail Ahmed, the then VP of DUCSU and President of the Central Students' Action Committee. During 1969, on a trip to London, he met with Indian intelligence officer Phanindranath Banerjee ("Nath Babu") to discuss the preparatory measures for the coming changes. On December 5, 1969, he officially declared that the name of this province would be "Bangladesh" [2, 3].

### The 6-Point Demand: The Charter of Freedom

The 6-Point Demand of 1966 was the greatest political "masterstroke" of Bangabandhu's life. According to essayist Morshed Shafiul Hasan, it was essentially the blueprint for the independence of Bangladesh. Bangabandhu was arrested eight times while campaigning for the Six (6) points. Through this movement, he taught the common people that independence without economic liberation is meaningless. Before his arrest on May 8, 1966, he created an unprecedented awakening across the country, leading to the June 7, 1966, strike where protesters' blood was shed on the streets, turning the tide irrevocably toward the final independence [4].

### The Liberation War and the Dawn of Freedom (1970-1971)

Following the 1970 election victory, Bangabandhu moved toward final preparations as it became clear the military would not hand over power. By 1970, he was arranging for BLF (Bangladesh Liberation Force) workers to receive arms training in India. He used trusted associates like Chittaranjan Sutar in Kolkata and Abu Hena in Bangladesh as intermediaries. On February 18, 1971, Bangabandhu held a closed-door meeting with his closest associates. He had them memorize a secret address in Kolkata - "Sunny Villa, 21 Rajendra Prasad Road"- to be used as a base if war breaks out [5].

Through the historic speeches of March 3 and March 7, Bangabandhu transformed an unarmed nation into an armed one. Before 'Operation Searchlight' began on the night of March 25, he refused to leave his residence, knowing that his absence would lead to even more horrific massacres by the Pakistani Army.

With his declaration of independence in the early hours of March 26, 1971, the nine-month bloody Liberation War began. That same night, the Pakistani military arrested him from his residence at Dhanmondi 32, Dhaka and kept him imprisoned in West Pakistan for the duration of the war. Through the sacrifice of 3 million martyrs and immense suffering, final victory was achieved on December 16, 1971.

### Conclusion

The political evolution of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a series of calculated, disciplined steps with immense dedication and affection for the people of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). From the Language Movement of 1948 to the Declaration of Independence in 1971, he spent 23 years preparing the nation for its sovereign destiny and to gain the ultimate freedom for the people. His ability to lead both as a public democratic movement and a secret revolutionary struggle established him as the unparalleled architect of Bangladesh.

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# THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE BY BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN: FACTUAL AND JURISPRUDENTIAL LEGITIMACY

Nafi Chowdhury\*

The legitimacy of a declaration of independence under international law frequently depends on the identity of its issuer. Declarations made by recognised political leaders who represent the populace generally carry greater weight than those issued by military authorities during periods of conflict. The 1971 declaration associated with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is particularly significant, as it was issued by a democratically elected leader following the 1970 Pakistani general election, in which his party achieved a decisive victory.

The doctrine of self-determination emphasises the will of the people as expressed through their political representation. The emergence of Bangladesh as a state was not solely declaratory; it also entailed the establishment of a provisional government and the implementation of institutional processes. These developments demonstrated that the new state fulfilled the fundamental requirements of statehood: a defined territory, a permanent population, a functioning government, and the capacity to engage in international relations. Therefore, the events of 1971 represent not only a struggle for independence but also the exercise of effective leadership, as exemplified by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who transformed collective aspirations into a legitimate and structured state.



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, also known as Bangabandhu, is seen as the main political and moral leader behind Bangladesh’s declaration of independence in 1971. His announcement on 26 March 1971 is backed by strong evidence from both local and international sources. This includes declarations made at the time, messages sent, eyewitness accounts, official documents, and international reports. Together, these sources show that his leadership and authorship are well supported. They also make it clear that the declaration was not a sudden or isolated event, but the result of an organised political effort and a movement led by the people for self-determination.

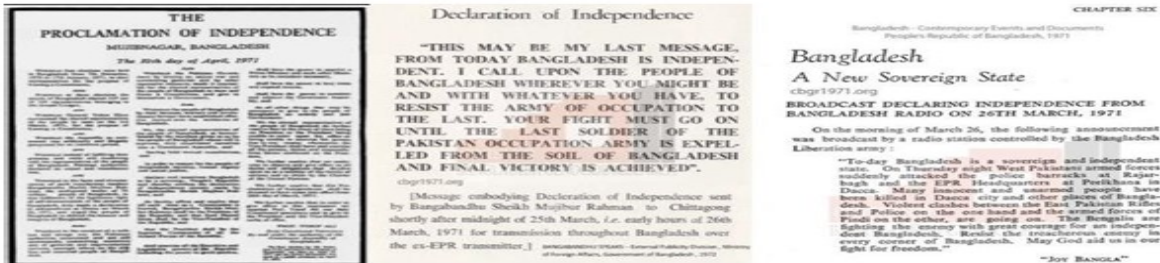
The Proclamation of Independence issued by the Mujib Nagar Government on 10 April 1971 is the first official statement confirming Bangladesh’s independence (1). It explicitly states that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence on 26 March 1971 (2). This document is a key part of Bangladesh’s constitutional history, as it formed the legal and administrative basis for the provisional government (3). Awami League leaders, Tajuddin Ahmed and Dr Kamal Hossain, have confirmed that Mujibur Rahman declared independence on the night of 25 March 1971 and sent messages before his arrest, which were subsequently

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ratified by the provisional government.

Prior to his arrest at his residence in Dhanmondi, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh via a wireless broadcast that was relayed for transmission, and the message was subsequently read out by the



independence of Bangladesh via a wireless broadcast that was relayed for transmission, and the message was subsequently read out by the Awami League leader M. A. Hannan from Kalurghat Radio Station on 26 March 1971 (4). On the following day, 27 March 1971, Major Ziaur Rahman announced over the *Kalurghat Radio Station* a further declaration on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, stating “I, Major Ziaur Rahman, on behalf of our national leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, do hereby declare that the independent People’s Republic of Bangladesh has been established” (5).

Swadhinata Juddher Dalilpatra), which preserves telegrams, messages, and eyewitness testimonies relating to the declaration of independence and the Liberation War (6).

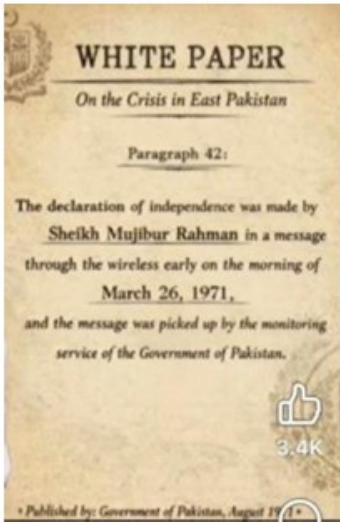


There are many international documentary sources about Bangabandhu’s declaration. These include:

- The Pakistan Government White Paper (1971) on the Crisis in East Pakistan states that he had “virtually declared independence of East Pakistan”. This shows that even Pakistan recognised he had effectively declared independence.

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# THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE BY BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN



Declassified U.S. documents from the Department of State and Central Intelligence Agency, which say that Bangabandhu declared independence and that East Pakistan had effectively broken away.



Indian government and military sources, including intelligence and border communications, also referred to Bangabandhu's declaration.



## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE BY BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN

International media reports provide substantial evidence regarding the proclamation. Outlets such as The New York Times, The Times, The Guardian, The Irish Times, and numerous others worldwide covered the event, documenting the declaration of independence around 26 March and the subsequent rebellion against Pakistan (7). It is trustworthy evidence, as ABC Television reported that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the Independent Republic of Bangladesh.

To sum up, the events of 1971 in East Pakistan marked a time of major political, social, and human challenges. Reports from that period show the hardships people faced, the tensions between communities, and the difficult relationship with Pakistan's central government. In these difficult times, strong and compassionate leadership was clearly needed. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman stood out for his commitment to justice, human dignity, and the hopes of his people. He played a key role in leading the independence movement with courage and vision. His leadership brought people together and helped lead to the creation of Bangladesh as an independent country.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is widely known for his dedication and vision. His life shows how strong leadership, based on empathy, moral values, and resilience, can change history. News Reports, eyewitness accounts, and historical studies all show both the suffering people endured and the determination of those who fought for freedom. Learning about these events teaches lasting lessons about courage, determination, and leadership, and confirms Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's important role in building the nation and inspiring others.

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## Short Story

# FIVE MINUTES FROM THE PRISON GATE

Engr. M. Hossain\*

On a winter night, the sky in Bangladesh takes on a strange hue, a mix of ash and fog, accompanied by an unusual silence. That evening, the stillness felt almost feverish. An ambulance glided slowly along the road toward Jessore, as if fearing that even the sound of its horn might cause pain.

The driver's name is Mukul (fictional). He has transported many bodies in his line of work—death cares little for age or surname. Yet that night, his hands trembled—not on the steering wheel, but deep in his chest. The two wooden boxes in the back of the ambulance were not merely boxes; they were two unfinished stories.

One story was named “Subarna,” and the other “Nazim”—the incomplete tale of a life that lasted just nine months.

Mukul couldn't fathom how such a tragedy could occur. The mother's heartbeat, the baby's breath, the fragile window of the world—all turned to ashes in a single night. But those in the back of the ambulance understood. Their eyes brimmed with tears that couldn't find words; they could only stare at the faces around them, as if the faces themselves were weeping.

Mukul's assistant spoke up. “Boss, who will take the body today?”

Mukul replied, “Today, the body is going to a living person.”

The boy was taken aback. “But boss, the body is going to the grave.”

Mukul sighed deeply. “In this country, the grave is often not the final destination. Some mourners are buried at the prison gate as well.”

Ironically, the prison gate is called ‘Gate’—how familiar that name is! Yet the difference between the inside and outside of that gate is anything but ordinary. On one side is the bustling world—tea shops, the sound of rickshaws, a cacophony of life, and the relentless rush to survive. On the other side is another realm—people referred to by numbers, their breaths governed by time, and their prayers caught behind iron bars.

That evening, the lamp at the gate had already been lit, casting a shimmering glow through the fog. A small crowd gathered outside—some journalists, some passersby, and others simply curious onlookers.

The ambulance came to a stop. Mukul noticed the correctional officer standing nearby. In the dim red-blue light, his face looked shadowed, his eyes complex. Yet deep within those stern eyes, there was a softness—like moss growing on a stone.

The guard approached and asked, “Who?”

Mukul replied softly, “Last seen.”

The guard's eyes shifted slightly. The phrase “last seen” is not written on any paper; no rules bind it. Yet among people, the term carries a kind of permission that is not a law, yet it questions the law nonetheless.

A few relatives were allowed to enter. The rest stood outside, much like in life. Not everyone can open all the doors; some open only for inevitable cries.

Inside a deserted corridor, a man was instructed to walk. No one called him by name; they referred to him by his case and cell numbers. But today, he was called by name. A harsh voice rang out over the microphone:

— Prison gate, cell number... Saddam, urgent meeting. Come to the gate.

The man stopped. The word “urgent” made the prisoners' hearts tremble. “Urgent” can signal either good news or terrible news—there is no middle ground.

He walked toward the gate with weariness in his steps, as if someone had carried his body for a long time, and now that body

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## FIVE MINUTES FROM THE PRISON GATE

felt like a burden.

When he reached the gate, the first thing he saw was an ambulance. Then he noticed a few of his close relatives standing there, all crying. At that moment, he felt as if someone had lifted the fog from his chest.

His feet would not move. He just stared. Even in silence, there was so much to say—words could not reach.

The prison officer spoke in a low voice:

— Time is short. Five minutes.

Five minutes. How ridiculous this measure of time is compared to human love and death! Marriage is dreamed of for years, children are born after months of anticipation, yet farewells are confined to just five minutes.

The ambulance door opened. Two wooden boxes were slowly lowered. White cloth covered the boxes, with two handfuls of roses resting on top, as if someone believed that the fragrance of roses could make grief a little more bearable.

The accused Saddam, no longer identified as a “husband” or a “father,” yet seeming to embody both roles, stood before the two boxes. His hands were not tied, but he could not raise them. Perhaps he understood that this touch would yield no comfort. People do not reach out to touch for profit; they reach out to feel, to affirm their humanity.

He stared for a while, then whispered suddenly,

— Subarna...

No one heard him, but the dead heard—such is the belief in our land. The dead listen because they have no other tasks; they exist only to listen and be. The living speak because their words freeze and turn to stone within them.

His gaze fixed on the small box—the box of a nine-month-old baby. He calculated in his mind—how many mornings are there in nine months? How many times can one learn to say “father” in nine months? There were no answers to these calculations; the unanswerable questions tightened his chest.

He bent down. The prison officer moved a little closer, fearing the man might fall. But he did not fall; he merely touched his head to the box as a gesture of desperation, more helpless than his hands.

What can a person do in five minutes? Some say their last words, some apologize, some curse. But he did nothing. Only a small, silent cry caught in his throat, like many of the words of prisoners trapped in confinement.

His father-in-law urged him,

— Father, look at your child...

Saddam looked. He saw his child’s face—calm, strangely calm, as if all quarrels and crying had come to an end. To him, the faces of the living did not share such calm.

Time was running out. Time always ends, whether in happiness or sorrow. But the end of time in sadness feels like an unyielding lock.

The prison officer said,

— Let’s go.

The man took a step back, then stopped again. He felt a desire to plead for one more minute. But in this country, “one more minute” is often the most requested and the least likely.

He glanced back just once. In that look, it felt as if he were bidding farewell to his own life. Some deaths do not just claim lives—they also extinguish future possibilities.

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## FIVE MINUTES FROM THE PRISON GATE

The two wooden boxes were lifted again, and the ambulance door closed. The relatives standing outside began to cry. Crying brings people together, but it offers no solutions; it only reveals that we are all broken inside.

The man started walking down the corridor again. This time, his gait was not just tired but empty, as if someone had taken his soul from his body; all that remained was the habit of walking.

That night, the ambulance sped toward Bagerhat. By the time it reached the village, darkness had fallen. The funeral took place, with people carrying the bodies on their shoulders. Graves were dug side by side, one large, one small. Soil was poured into the graves. Flowers were scattered, and prayers were offered. The air was filled with the scent of perfume mingling with the vapor of tears in the fog.

Mukul stood a little distance away, watching. He was neither a relative nor a friend; he was just the ambulance driver. Yet he understood that today he served as a strange bridge—from the world of the living to that of the dead, and then back again to the crowd of the living.

After the burial, someone whispered, “May Allah save that boy... How will he bear the pain in jail?” Mukul thought, “No, no, no—no one can truly bear it; survival is often a matter of pretending to endure.”

A few days later, Saddam, in prison, could not sleep at night. Whenever he tried to sleep, two faces appeared: Subarna’s and another, Nazim’s. But the faces did not speak. Only the fog in the gaps between the walls seemed to have a voice.

One night, he dreamed that the prison gate had opened. But outside, there were only two shadows standing, one big and one small. The large shadow wore a headscarf, while the small shadow, unable to walk properly, still moved forward.

The two shadows stood before him. The big shadow said, “It was only five minutes, but what does love know of time?” As he cried, he realized there were no tears in his eyes; only fire.

The little shadow raised its hand. Its fingers were as transparent as air, yet he felt a touch—for once.

Suddenly, a microphone rang out even in his dreams: “Time is up. Go back to your cell.”

He sat up in surprise. It was night outside, and the prison lights were on. A train whistle sounded in the distance, as if the train were saying, “Life goes on; it doesn’t stop.” But some griefs are not like trains; they are stationary, like stones.

Then he understood that the dead do not actually come to meet anyone. They come to awaken the unfinished words within the living. They come to say, “I am not here, but I remain within you.”

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## উত্তাল একাত্তরের মার্চ

### শওকত আহসান ফারুক

একাত্তরের মার্চের প্রথম দিনে শুরু হয় ষড়যন্ত্রের সূচনা। পার্লামেন্ট স্থগিত করে দেন এক বেতার ভাষণে প্রেসিডেন্ট ইয়াহিয়া খান। দেশ বিক্ষোভে ফুসে উঠল। আওয়ামী লীগের জরুরী সভায় মার্চের ৩ তারিখ সারাদেশে সর্বাঙ্গিক হরতালের আহ্বান জানালেন শেখ মুজিব। দলমত নির্বিশেষে সর্বস্তরের জনগণ একতাবদ্ধ হলো। পালিত হলো হরতাল। সেই সফল হরতালের পর বঙ্গবন্ধু অনতিবিলম্বে পার্লামেন্ট ডেকে ক্ষমতা হস্তান্তর করতে আহ্বান জানান প্রেসিডেন্ট ইয়াহিয়া খানকে।

#### প্রথম পতাকা

ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের বটতলায় মার্চের ২ তারিখ ডাকসুর ভিপি অ.স.ম আবদুর রব প্রথম বাংলাদেশের জাতীয় পতাকা উত্তোলন করেন এবং পলটনে ছাত্রলীগের সাধারণ সম্পাদক শাজাহান সিরাজ পাঠ করেন স্বাধীনতার ইস্তেহার। সেই ইস্তেহারে বঙ্গবন্ধু শেখ মুজিবুর রহমানে জাতির পিতা এবং 'আমার সোনার বাংলা আমি তোমায় ভালোবাসি' জাতীয় সংগীত হিসাবে ঘোষণা করা হয়। সেই পতাকা নির্মাণের ইতিহাস একটু পেছনে ফিরে দেখি, ১৯৭০ সালের ৭ জুন পল্টন ময়দানে, ছাত্রদের এক কুচকাওয়াজে বঙ্গবন্ধু শেখ মুজিবুর রহমান অংশ গ্রহণের কথা ছিল। সেই লক্ষ্যে ছাত্রলীগের নেতারা জাতীয় পতাকা বানানের সিদ্ধান্ত নেয়। ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের ইকবাল হলের ১১৭ নং কক্ষে, ছাত্রনেতা অ.স.ম আবদুর রব, শাহজাহান সিরাজ, কাজী আরেফ আহমেদ, মার্শাল মনি, শিব নারায়ন দাশ, স্বপন কুমার চৌধুরী, হাসানুল হক ইনু, নজরুল ইসলাম, ইউসুফ সালাহউদ্দিনের উপস্থিতিতে পতাকার একটি ডিজাইন তৈরি করেন। সবার সম্মতিতে বাংলার সবুজ জমিনের উপর লাল সূর্য, সেই সূর্যের মাঝে সোনালী রঙের বাংলাদেশের মানচিত্র থাকবে। সেই রাতেই নিউ মার্কেট এক বিহারী দরজীর নিকট একখন্ড সবুজ কাপড়ের উপর গোল লাল সূর্য সেলাই করে নিয়ে আসেন কামরুল আলম খান খসরু। তারপর প্রকৌশল বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের তৎকালীন কায়দে আজম হল বর্তমানে তীতুমীর হলের ৩১২ নং কক্ষের এনামুল হকের কাছ থেকে মানচিত্রের বই নিয়ে ট্রেসিং পেপারে বাংলাদেশের মানচিত্র আঁকা হয়, কুমিল্লা জেলা ছাত্রলীগের সাধারণ সম্পাদক ছাত্রলীগের কেন্দ্রীয় নেতা শিব নারায়ন দাশ আমাদের শিবুদা তার নিপুন হাতে, সেই মানচিত্র সোনালী কাপড়ে বসিয়ে দেন, তারপর সেই মানচিত্র লাল সূর্যের উপর শোভিত পতাকা আমাদের প্রাণের চেয়ে প্রিয়।

#### রূপকার শিবুদা

বাংলাদেশের জাতীয় পতাকার রূপকারদের একজন শিব নারায়ন দাশ। সেই স্থূল জীবন থেকে দেখে এসেছি, ১৯৬২ হামিদুর রহমান শিক্ষা কমিশন, '৬৩ তে কুমিল্লায় তৃতীয় বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, ২১ ফেব্রুয়ারি শহীদ দিবসে, '৬৯ গণ আন্দোলনে। শিবুদার নিপুণহাতের ছোঁয়ায় বানানো সেই পতাকা ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের ঐতিহাসিক বট তলায় প্রথম উড়েছিল ২ মার্চ, আমরা কুমিল্লাবাসী গর্বিত শিব নারায়ন দাশের জন্য।

#### একতাবদ্ধ

মার্চের ১ তারিখে ইয়াহিয়ার ঘোষণা, জাতিকে আরো একতাবদ্ধ করে দিলো, সারাদেশ উত্তাল, সকাল বিকাল মিছিল মিটিং, রাতে মশাল মিছিল। গণসংগীত, কবিতা পাঠ, সেই ভরা বসন্তে ফাগুনের আগুন জ্বালিয়ে দিলো। "আমরা জ্যেৎস্নার প্রতিবেশী" বসে নেই বিপ্লবী কবিতা নিয়ে, ছাপিয়ে ফেলি লিটল ম্যাগ। প্রতিবাদে কাঁপছে দেশ, গণসংগীতে মুখরিত কুমিল্লা। মার্চের ৭ তারিখ ঢাকার রেসকোর্সে জনসভা ডাকলেন, শেখ মুজিবুর রহমান।

#### ৭ মার্চ শুরুতেই বলে দিলেন শেষ কথা

মার্চের ৩ তারিখ সফল হরতাল, দেশের সর্বস্তরের জনগণ একতাবদ্ধ। পদ্মা মেঘনা যমুনা উঠেছে বিক্ষোভের ঢেউ। লাল সবুজের পতাকায় সূর্যোদয়, সোনার বাংলা। সাতই মার্চ রেসকোর্সে জনসভা, জাতি অপেক্ষায় বঙ্গবন্ধু কী বলবেন।

প্রতিদিন মিছিল, যারা পশ্চিম পাকিস্তান থেকে এসেছিলেন, পার্লামেন্টে যোগদিতে তেজগাঁ বিমান বন্দর দিয়ে ফিরে গেলেন। একটি ক্রান্তিপূর্ণ অতিক্রম করছে দেশ ও জাতি। আমি সেই সময়ে টগবগে যুবক, রক্তে বইছে স্বাধীনতা।

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## উত্তাল একাত্তরের মার্চ

আপনারা সবই জানেন এবং বোঝেন, এ'কথা দিয়েই শুরু করলেন সেদিনের ভাষণ, এটাই তো সেদিনের মূল কথা বাংলার জনগণ বুঝে গেছে, কী করতে হবে, জেনে গেছে পশ্চিমাদের মনোভাব। এতদিনের নিপীড়ন, শোষণ, নির্যাতনের ফলাফল জানিয়ে দিয়েছে ব্যালটে। এটা মেনে নেবে কীভাবে, ভুট্টো কোন ভাবেই শেখ মুজিবের শাসন মেনে নিবে না, ওরা এক হয়ে গেল। তাইতো সংসদ ডেকে দুদিন আগে স্বগিতাদেশ, অনির্দিষ্ট কালের জন্য, অনিশ্চিত ভবিষ্যৎ। অনেকটা ভারত ভাগের মতোই, ক্ষমতার লোভ, আবার দেশভাগ। বাংলার জনগণের রায় মেনে নিবে না, এটাই প্রতিয়মান।

তিনি এলেন, সেই আটচল্লিশ সালেই ভেবেছিলেন নূতন দেশের স্বপ্ন, বাহান্ন, চুয়ান্ন, বাষট্টি, উনসত্তর, সত্তরে পেলেন ঐতিহাসিক রায়। সবাই জানে বোঝে, এবার ক্ষমতাসীন হবে বাংলা, এটাই গণতন্ত্রের মূলকথা, ঠিক তখনি চলছে, ইয়াহিয়া ভুট্টোর চক্রান্ত। তাইতো বলেন, 'ভায়েরা আমার, আজ দুঃখ ভরাকান্ত মন নিয়ে আপনাদের সামনে এসে হাজির হয়েছি, আপনারা সবই জানেন এবং বোঝেন'। হৃদয়ের সবটুকু ভালোবাসা দিয়ে, বাংলার মানুষকে বুঝিয়েছেন, জাগিয়েছেন দেশপ্রেম ও ভালোবাসা। আমরা নতুন করে শিখেছি বাংলা আমার দেশ, বাংলা আমার ভাষা।

সম্মোখনেই বলে দিলেন শেষ কথা। জানিয়ে দিলেন কর্মসূচী, শেষ করলেন। এবারের সংগ্রাম স্বাধীনতার সংগ্রাম।

সেদিন রেসকোর্সে সর্বস্তরের জনগণ এসেছিল স্বাধীনতার কথা জানতে। পরদিন আমরা শুনেছি কুমিল্লায়, সাত কোটি লোকের বাংলাদেশের প্রায় সবাই শুনেছে সেই ঐতিহাসিক ভাষণ, রেডিওতে। দিলেন স্বাধীনতার ঘোষণা, সংগ্রাম করে অর্জন করতে হবে।

### স্বপ্নাহত

উত্তাল মার্চের প্রতিটা ক্ষণকাল নির্মান করছে, নতুন স্বপ্ন। স্বপ্নাহত জাতি নতুন স্বপ্নলোক প্রজ্বলিত। আবার গণসংগীত, গীতিনাট, কবিতা মিছিল মিটিং চলছে চলবে। টাউনহল, সুইটহোম, সিটি সুইটস্, পেড়া ভান্ডার, খেলার মাঠ সবখানে একই কথা, স্বাধীনতা স্বাধীনতা। 'আমরা করবো জয়, আমরা করবো জয়' জয় বাংলার জয় হবেই। আমরা হারিনি কখনো।

### ৩২ নম্বর

সাতই মার্চের ভাষণের পর বাংলাদেশের শাসন ক্ষমতা বঙ্গবন্ধু শেখ মুজিবের রহমানের নিয়ন্ত্রণে চলে আসে। অফিস, আদালত, সচিবালয়, ব্যাংক, বীমা, স্কুল কলেজ বাংলার সবকিছু চলছে, ধানমন্ডি ৩২ নম্বর থেকে শেখ মুজিবের নির্দেশনায়। সম্পূর্ণ আসহযোগ আন্দোলন। পাকিস্তান সরকারের সব নিয়ন্ত্রণ বাংলায় অচল। যেন স্বাধীন দেশ। সেইসব সময় আজ রূপকথা মনে হয়, কী উদ্যম, কী উত্তেজনা প্রতিটি ক্ষণ, মুহূর্ত প্রস্তুতি নয়া আগামীর জন্য।

আন্দোলন, অসহযোগ দেখে প্রেসিডেন্ট ইয়াহিয়া খান, ঢাকায় চলে আসেন। ১৬ মার্চ ঢাকায় অনুষ্ঠিত হয়, মুজিব - ইয়াহিয়া বৈঠক, ক্ষমতা হস্তান্তরের বিষয়ে আলোচনা চলছে, চলে এলেন জুলফিকার আলী ভুট্টো, আলোচনায় যোগ দিতে। বাংলাদেশ চলছে ঐতিহাসিক ৩২ নম্বর থেকে।

### ভ্রাম্যমান গণসংগীত

প্রতিক্ষণে পরিবর্তিত হচ্ছে দৃশ্যপট। মনে হয় আজই ফয়সালা হবে, যে কোন সময় বসবে পার্লামেন্ট। আবার মনে হচ্ছে কিছুই হবে না, আন্তর্জাতিক কোন ষড়যন্ত্র চলছে কোথাও। দুই মহাশক্তি সোভিয়েত রাশিয়া ও মার্কিন সাম্রাজ্যবাদ, সবদিকে লবিং চলছে। তবে বাংলাদেশ চলছে ৩২ নম্বর থেকে শেখ মুজিবের শাসনে। পাকিস্তান সরকারের কোন নিয়ন্ত্রণ নেই। তবুও

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## উত্তাল একাত্তরের মার্চ

প্রতিদিন চলছে, ইয়াহিয়া - মুজিব- ভুটোর মিটিং।

আমাদের সব আয়োজন শেষ, ২৩ মার্চ অনুষ্ঠান। উত্তম সাজিয়েছে ট্রাক পেছনে ব্যানার লিখে দিলেন রুপায়নের মোহম্মদ আলী ভাই। বিকেল তিনটায় রেসকোর্সের স্টেশন রোডে প্রথম অনুষ্ঠান। সেখানে আয়োজন করছে, আমার সেই পুরনো বন্ধুরা। আমার মামার বাড়ি সবাই এগিয়ে এলেন। গ্রীন ফার্মেসির হাবিব মামা, বন্ধু মোস্তাফা, জহির, আজাদ, বদরুল, কুমিল্লা কলেজের শাহজাহান সাজু, ধর্মপুরের জলিল, নুরুল হক চানু, আবেদীন রেষ্টুরেন্টের আবু, রোকন মামা, মনিক মামা। সবাই আধীর আগ্রহ নিয়ে অপেক্ষা, কখন আসবে জ্যেৎস্নার প্রতিবেশীর' ভ্রম্যমান ট্রাক, শুনবে জাগরণের গান।

ঠিক তিনটায় আমরা এসে পৌঁছাই রেসকোর্স। স্টেশন রোড ব্লক করে, উত্তর দিকে ফ্রন্ট করে, ঠিক তিনটায় মার্চের রোডে কয়েক হাজার মানুষের সামনে আমাদের প্রথম উপস্থাপন। ২ মিনিটের স্বাগত ভাষণ দিলেন, জহিরুল হল দুলাল, হেলেন শুরু করেন মূল অনুষ্ঠানের ঘোষণা। প্রথমেই সমবেত সংগীত। 'আমার সোনার বাংলা আমি তোমায় ভালোবাসি' সবার চেতনায় তখন স্বাধীনতার স্বাদ, বদরুল হাসান স্যার শুরু করলেন তাহার সেই বলিষ্ঠ কণ্ঠে আবৃত্তি।

বল বীর, বল উন্নত মম শির! শির নেহারি আমারি নত শির ওই শিখর হিমাদ্রির!

কবিতা শুনে সবাই করোতালিতে মুখরিত করলো, কবিতা জনপ্রিয় মাধ্যম। শামসুদ্দীন আহমেদ ভুলু ভাই নির্দেশনা সেদিনের সেই ট্রাকে ছিলেন, নাসির আহম্মদ, সানু তালুকদার, শিরিন সুলতানা বেবী, স্বপ্না রায়, শিপ্রা দাশগুপ্তা, তবলায় শেফাল রায়, গিটারে মিলন, ধারা বর্ণনায় হেলেন ও আমি, নাচে শুভ্রা আর তেমন কারো নাম মনে আসছে না, সুকান্তে ছাড়াপত্র কবিতা, 'যে শিশু ভূমিষ্ট হলো আজ রাতে -' নজরুলের সেই গান, আমাদের সেই সময় নজরুল ছিলো প্রেরণা। জাগো অনশন বন্দী উঠোরে যত, জগতের লাঞ্ছিত ভাগ্যহত, জাগো জগতের লাঞ্ছিত ভাগ্যহত, জাগো' সেই গান সেদিন অন্যমাত্রা এনেছে, এসেছে গণ জোয়ার। ৪৫ মিনিটের সেই অনুষ্ঠান সবার মন জয় করে নিলো, সবাই উজ্জ্বলিত।

### মোগলটুলি

সেই ট্রাক চলে যায় মোগলটুলি আঞ্জারিয়া হোটেলের সামনে, সেখানে অপেক্ষায় রয়েছেন আনসার ভাই সাথে, মোস্তাক, মিলন কালীর মিজান, রাখী গুহ, জুয়েল ভাই, মেসকোর নিজামুদ্দিন, নজির, আরো অনেকেই। বিকাল ৫ টায় হলো মোগলটুলির অনুষ্ঠান। আমাদের আপ্যায়িত করলেন আনসার ভাই, মিজান ভাই।

### চকবাজার

চকবাজারে তেলিকোণা চৌমুহনীতে হলো ৩য় শো। রৌফ ভাই, আউয়াল ভাই, শহাআলম, মহিউদ্দিন, শাহজাহান অনেকেই ছিলেন। সেই সময় তেলিকোণার মতো জায়গায় অনুষ্ঠান ভাবাই যায় না, সন্ধ্যা সাতটায় সেই অনুষ্ঠানে অনঅগ্রসর এলাকার ঘরের মেয়েরাও উপস্থিত হয়ে ছিল। ভীষণ সাদা পরেছিল চকবাজার এলাকায়।

### টমসম ব্রীজ

৯ টায় টমসম ব্রীজে, সেখানে সেদিন অনেকেই ছিল। শাহজাদা লাকী, সফিউল আহমেদ বাবুল, কাজী মনসুর আহমেদ সহ অনেকেই সহযোগিতা করেছে। রাত নয়টা তবুও অনেক লোকের সমাগম, আমরা ক্লান্ত হলেও সবার উৎসাহ দেখে, সব ক্লান্তি শক্তিতে, সানিত হলো।

## উত্তাল একাত্তরের মার্চ

### কান্দিরপাড়

শহরের কেন্দ্রবিন্দু, রাত তখন ১১ টা, লোকে লোকারণ্য, ভ্রম্যমান আয়োজন দেখার জন্য। মার্কেন্টাইল ব্যাংকের সামনে, সবচেয়ে বড় আয়োজন করি। বদরুল হাসান স্যারের কণ্ঠ আরো শানিত হলো। সেদিন ট্রাকে বসে দেখেছি, মানুষের ভালোবাসা, দেশপ্রেম, বুঝতে পেরেছি জয় বাংলার জয় হবে। সাতই মার্চের পর থেকে দেখা হলে, আমরা পরস্পর, জয় বাংলা বলে সম্বোধন করি।

### ঝাউতলা

জ্যেৎস্নার প্রতিবেশী' কার্যালয়ের সামনে, রাত ১ টায় আমরা, শেষ আয়োজন, সবাই জানে এখানেই শেষ হবে। ঝাউতলা আসার পর সবাই বাসায় নেমে ফ্রেস হই। কিছু পানাহার করে আবার ট্রাকে উঠি। রাত ১ টায়, অনুষ্ঠিত হচ্ছে, সেই ঐতিহাসিক ভ্রাম্যমান, গণসংগীতের, আয়োজন। সেদিনের ঝাউতলার অনুষ্ঠানে আমার এলাকার নারী পুরুষ সবাই এসেছে, আমাদের অনুষ্ঠান উপভোগ করতে। নাসির ভাই, ঝাউতলার অনুষ্ঠানে নির্ধারিত গান পাটেদিয়ে, গাইলেন অন্য গান। এদিকে মুজিব - ইয়াহিয়া - ভুট্টো, দফায় দফায় ব্যর্থ আলোচনা চালিয়ে যাচ্ছেন, সেই খবরও জানছি, কুমিল্লা শহরে আমাদের প্রচেষ্টা সফল হয়েছিল। নাসির ভাই বললেন, আমি নির্ধারিত গান না গেয়ে একটা ভালোবাসার গান গাইব বলে গেয়ে উঠলেন।

'আজ জ্যেৎস্না রাতে সবাই গেছে বনে, বসন্তেরই মাতাল সমীরনে'

### অমীমাংসিত

মার্চের ২৪ তারিখ পূর্বস্ত মুজিব - ইয়াহিয়া - ভুট্টোর অমীমাংসিত বৈঠক চলে ঢাকা ইন্টারকন্টিনেন্টাল হোটেলে। সব আলোচনা ব্যর্থ। আমরা ভ্রাম্যমান গণসংগীত শেষ করে ক্লাস্ত, এতদিনের পরিশ্রম সফল হয়েছে, দেশ উজ্জ্বলিত। অমীমাংসিত বৈঠক, ব্যর্থ আলোচনা, অনিশ্চিত ভবিষ্যৎ।

আলোচনারত অবস্থায়, ইয়াহিয়া - ভুট্টো বুনছে ষড়যন্ত্রের জাল, কোন যুক্তি মানছে না। ২৫ মার্চ সন্ধ্যায় প্রেসিডেন্ট ইয়াহিয়া ঢাকা ত্যাগ করেন।

### অপারেশন সার্চ লাইট

বাঙালি নিধনযন্ত্রের পরিকল্পনা হয়েছিল একাত্তরের মার্চের শুরুতেই, জুলফিকার আলী ভুট্টোর বাড়ি পাকিস্তানের লারকানায়। শিকারের নামে এই গণহত্যার ষড়যন্ত্রে যারা অংশ নিয়েছিলেন তাদের মধ্যে জুলফিকার আলী ভুট্টো, জেনারেল ইয়াহিয়া এবং জেনারেল হামিদ অন্যতম। ওরা ভেবেছে, মনে করেছে কয়েক হাজার মানুষ হত্যা করলেই ভয় পেয়ে যাবে বাঙালি, ভুলে যাবে স্বাধীনতা এবং স্বাধিকারের কথা। কতটা নির্বোধ, আমরা জেগেছি, আমরা লড়ব। এতসব আলোচনার আড়ালে ছিল, সেই নির্মম পরিকল্পনা।

### সেদিন মধ্যরাতে

২৫শে মার্চ মধ্যরাতে পাকিস্তান সেনাবাহিনী 'অপারেশন সার্চ লাইট'-এর নামে একযোগে ভারী অস্ত্রসস্ত্র নিয়ে হামলা চালায় সারা দেশে একযোগে। ঢাকায় তখনকার পুলিশ (ইপিআর) সদর দপ্তর, রাজারবাগ পুলিশ লাইন, ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের ছাত্রবাস। গোলা নিক্ষেপ করে মেডিক্যাল কলেজ ছাত্রবাসে, হামলা চালায় ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের বস্তি এলাকায়। জগন্নাথ হল, সদর ঘাট, রেল স্টেশন বেছে বেছে হিন্দু বাড়িতে। আওয়ামী লীগ নেতাদের বাড়িতে বাড়িতে।

২৫শে মার্চ রাতে ইয়াহিয়া ঢাকা ত্যাগের পর পাকিস্তান পৌঁছানোর আগেই বাংলায় গণহত্যা শুরু হয়ে যায়।

বঙ্গবন্ধু গ্রেপ্তার হওয়ার আগে ২৫ শে মার্চ রাতের ১২.২০ মিনিটে, ওয়্যারলেস বার্তার মাধ্যমে বাংলাদেশের স্বাধীনতার ডাক দিয়ে যান।

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*'This may be my last message: From today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh wherever you may be and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved.'*

এই ঘোষণা বাংলাদেশের সর্বত্র ওয়্যারলেস, টেলিফোন ও টেলিগ্রামের মাধ্যমে প্রেরিত হয়। এর সঙ্গে সঙ্গেই বাংলায় তিনি নিম্নলিখিত একটি বার্তা পাঠান।

পাকিস্তান সেনাবাহিনী অতর্কিতভাবে পিলখানা ইপিআর ঘাটি, রাজারবাগ পুলিশ লাইন আক্রমণ করেছে এবং শহরের রাস্তায় রাস্তায় যুদ্ধ চলছে, আমি বিশ্বের জাতিসমূহের কাছে সাহায্যের আবেদন করছি। আমাদের মুক্তিযোদ্ধারা বীরত্বের সঙ্গে মাতৃভূমি মুক্তকরার জন্য শত্রুদের সঙ্গে যুদ্ধ করছে। সর্বশক্তিমান আল্লাহর নামে আপনাদের কাছে আমার আবেদন ও আদেশ দেশকে স্বাধীন করার জন্য শেষ রক্তবিন্দু থাকা পর্যন্ত যুদ্ধ চালিয়ে যান। আপনাদের পাশে এসে যুদ্ধ করার জন্য পুলিশ, ইপিআর, বেঙ্গল রেজিমেন্ট ও আনসারদের সাহায্য চান। কোন আপোশ নাই। জয় আমাদের হবেই। পবিত্র মাতৃভূমি থেকে শেষ শত্রুকে বিতাড়িত করুন। সকল আওয়ামী লীগ নেতাকর্মী এবং অন্যান্য দেশ প্রেমিক প্রিয় লোকদের কাছে এ সংবাদ পৌঁছে দিন। আল্লাহ আপনাদের মঙ্গল করুন। জয় বাংলা।

বঙ্গবন্ধুর এই বার্তা তাৎক্ষণিক বিশেষ ব্যবস্থায় সারা দেশে পাঠানো হয়। সর্বস্তরের জনগণের পাশাপাশি কুমিল্লা, ঢাকা, যশোর, চট্টগ্রামে জওয়ানরা প্রতিরোধ গড়ে তোলেন।

রাত ১.৩০ মিনিটে পাকিস্তান সেনাবাহিনী ধানমন্ডি ৩২ নম্বর বাড়ি থেকে শেখ মুজিবুর রহমানকে গ্রেফতার করে এবং তিন দিন পর বন্দি অবস্থায় পশ্চিম পাকিস্তানে নিয়ে যাওয়া হয়।

তার আগে ৭ই মার্চের ভাষণেই তিনি বাঙালি জাতিকে স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামে ঝাঁপিয়ে পড়ার আহ্বান জানিয়েছিলেন বলেছিলেন, যার যা আছে তা নিয়ে প্রস্তুত থাকতে। ঝাঁপিয়ে পড়তে, স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামে। 'এবারের সংগ্রাম স্বাধীনতার সংগ্রাম'। স্বাধীনতার প্রথম ঘোষণা, আগেই করেছেন। আমরা প্রস্তুত।

ইতিহাসের এই নির্মম নিখনযজ্ঞ, রাতেই ছড়িয়ে পরে পুরো শহরে। ঘুমন্ত মানুষের ওপর ঝাঁপিয়ে পড়ে হায়নারা। সেই রাতেই রাজারবাগ পুলিশ লাইন থেকে প্রতিরোধ শুরু হয়। ইপিআর সদস্যরাও প্রতিরোধের চেষ্টা করে।

সারাদেশে নির্বিচারে পুলিশ লাইন ও বেছে বেছে আওয়ামী লীগের নেতা ও প্রভাবশালী হিন্দু বাড়িতে আক্রমণ করে।

এভাবেই ২৬ মার্চর সূচনা।

**শওকত আহসান ফারুক**

**কথাসাহিত্যিক**

**তাঁর উল্লেখযোগ্য বইগুলোর মধ্যে রয়েছে স্মৃতিচারণমূলক গ্রন্থ "যে স্মৃতি ধূসর হয়নি" এবং "রুম নাম্বার ১৪৬"**



# সংকট প্রহরে প্রাজ্ঞ ও কৌশলী নেতৃত্বের প্রত্যশায় আওয়ামী লীগ রাজীব পারভেজ

প্রায় দুই দশক আগে আন্টার্সের লেব সেন্সিটাইভে অর্বি শেলের রাজনৈতিক মনোভাৱে ডিজিটাল গভর্নেন্সের ব্যবস্থা ও এর কার্যকরিতা নিয়ে একটি বিশ্লেষণ সম্পন্ন করা। পরবর্তীতে এমফিস পদ্ধতিতে রাজনৈতিক মনোর অকার্যকর গভর্নেন্স চর্চা বিষয়কে গবেষণার ক্ষেত্র হিসেবে বেছে লিই। সেই ধারাবাহিকতার শিখইচাচি গবেষণার বিষয় ছিল স্বাধীনতা আওয়ামী লীগের অত্যন্ত গভর্নেন্সের সামগ্রিক চিত্র বিশ্লেষণ করা। এই গবেষণা ও অনুসন্ধানের অংশ হিসেবে গত প্রায় এক দশক ধরে দেশের বিভিন্ন মহানগর, জেলা, উপজেলা ও ইউনিয়ন পর্যায়ে দলীয় কার্যক্রম সত্রে মনোনিবেশ করান সুযোগ হয়েছে। পাশাপাশি আঞ্চলিক রাজনৈতিক সক্রিয়তা বোঝার জন্য প্রতিবেশী রাষ্ট্র কমান্ডের দীর্ঘদিনের ঐতিহাসিক রাজনৈতিক মনোভাৱের সাংগঠনিক কাঠামো সম্পর্কেও ধারণা নেওয়া চেষ্টা করেছে। এ উদ্দেশ্যে করে গবেষণার ন্যায্য সফল করে বিভিন্ন রাজনৈতিক মনোর নেতৃত্বের সঙ্গে আলোচনিতা ও সাক্ষাৎকার গ্রহণ করা। রাজনৈতিক সচিবীত্ব গবেষণার আদ্য এবং অপর্যায়িত মহানগর থেকেই মূলত বর্তমান উদ্দেশ্যে এই দীর্ঘ অনুসন্ধান ও অন্বেষণ নেয়ার চেষ্টা করেছে। সেই অন্বেষণ এবং বর্তমান রাজনৈতিক প্রেক্ষাপট মেনে ন্যায় আন্বেষণের বাস্তবতা বিস্তৃত করা করা। প্রয়োজন বলে মনে করছি— বিশেষ করে আওয়ামী লীগের নেতৃত্ব, সংগঠনিক শক্তি এবং কর্মসূচি বিকল্পের বিষয়ে।

আওয়ামী লীগের শক্তি ঐতিহাসিকভাবে তার কৃষকশক্তিক সাংগঠন। ইউনিয়ন, উপজেলা, জেলা থেকে কেন্দ্র পর্যন্ত একটি বিস্তারিত সাংগঠনিক নেটওয়ার্ক দলটির ভিত্তি তৈরি করেছে। পাশাপাশি স্বাধীনতার রাজনৈতিক ইতিহাসে আওয়ামী লীগ এবং একটি মনোর দায় শক্তি কেবল তার সাংগঠন নয় বরং তার কৃষিক শক্তি, তালী কর্মী এবং ব্যক্তিকর্মীদের দ্বারা গিয়ে উঠে আসে নেতৃত্ব। সময়ের প্রতিবর্তিতা ঘটই করিন হোক, ইতিহাস বাস্তব দেখিয়েছে যে সংকটের মুহুর্তে মনোর নতুন নেতৃত্ব, নতুন দলীয় এবং সাংগঠনিক কাঠামোর মাধ্যমে নিজেদের পুনর্গঠন করতে সক্ষম হয়েছে। মার্চের ২০০৭ সালের এক এগারের কক্ষ আসন্ন মনে করতে পারি। প্রয়াত শিহুর রহমান ও প্রয়াত সৈয়দ আলফাজ ইসলামের সাহসী ও প্রাণসিঁড়ি কৃষিকার মাধ্যমে মনোর সবকিছু যোকর্ষিত করতে সক্ষম হয়। বর্তমান সময়েও সেই প্রয়াস নতুন করে সামনে এসেছে।

আওয়ামী লীগের রাজনীতিতে হারামানটির ভূমিকা ঐতিহাসিকভাবে অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। কাম্ব আন্দোলন, ছত্র ধরা, গণঅকোশন থেকে শুরু করে মনোরতা সংগ্রাম সব ক্ষেত্রেই হারামানদের ভূমিকা ছিল অগ্রণী। হারামান থেকে উঠে আসে বহু নেতা পরবর্তীতে মনোর রাজনীতির গুরুত্বপূর্ণ দায়িত্ব পালন করেছেন। কিন্তু সময়ের পরিবর্তনের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে রাজনৈতিক বাস্তবতাও বদলেছে। এখন প্রয়োজন সেই ঐতিহ্যের ধারাবাহিকতার নতুনভাবে সাংগঠনিক শক্তিশালী করার উদ্দেশ্য। বর্তমান বাস্তবতা প্রায় হারামানদের একটি বড় অংশ রাজনীতি, দেশ, প্রশাসন কিংবা স্বাধিকর্মীদের বিভিন্ন ক্ষেত্রে প্রতিষ্ঠিত। তাদের অনেকেই সংগঠন পরিচালনার অন্বেষণ, রাজনৈতিক দুরূহি এবং সমাজের সত্য বিচার সংগ্রাম। এই অন্বেষণ ও অন্বেষণে মনোর আওয়ামী লীগের সাংগঠনিক কাঠামোর সঙ্গে আসন্ন সুসংহতভাবে যুক্ত করা যায়, তাহলে মনোর শক্তি প্লেত পারে।

একই সঙ্গে কৃষিকর্মী সমাজের সক্রিয় অংশগ্রহণও গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। রাজনৈতিক মনোর তখনই সক্রিয় হয়, যখন তার নিউনিউরী পর্যায়ে চিত্রাঙ্গিত মানুষ, গবেষণ, লেখক ও নিউনিউরীকাদের সত্যমত প্রতিবর্তিত হয়। বর্তমান সময়ে মনোর রাজনৈতিক, অন্বেষণিক ও আন্বেষণিক বাস্তবতা সোকবিলম্ব এবং একটি দলীয় পরিবেশ গড়ে তোলা মনোর, বেধনে মুক্তি, তথা ও নিজেদের জিওতে মনোর অন্বেষণ শক্তি করা সক্ষম। এক্ষেত্রে একজন মনোর ও এন্বেষণ দুরূহ বা স্পেন্সরদের ভূমিকাও অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। আধুনিক রাজনীতিতে কাম্বায়, স্বাধিকর্মী যোদ্ধাযোদ্ধা এবং মনোরের সত্য যোদ্ধাযোদ্ধা রক্ষা করা একটি বড় দায়িত্ব। দলীয় নীতি, অন্বেষণ ও কর্মসূচি পরিচালনাকে মনোরের মাঝে

## সংকট প্রহরে প্রাজ্ঞ ও কৌশলী নেতৃত্বের প্রত্যশায় আওয়ামী লীগ

তুলে ধরতে পারে এমন বক্ষ, শিক্ষিত ও পরিশীলিত বক্তা প্রয়োজন। প্রাক্কন ঘটনাবলি এবং বুদ্ধিবৈজ্ঞানিক সঙ্গ শ্রেণিকই এমন নেতৃত্ব তৈরি হওয়ার সম্ভাব্য।

একটি রাজনৈতিক দলের শক্তি কেবল তার কর্মতায় থাকে বা নির্দিষ্ট স্বকল্যাণে স্বীকৃতি নহে; বরং তার আর্থনিক দৃঢ়তা, সংগঠনের প্রসঙ্গিত এবং নতুন নেতৃত্ব তৈরির সক্ষমতার মাধ্যমে সেই শক্তি নিহিত থাকে। আওয়ামী লীগের দীর্ঘ ইতিহাসে এই তিনটি উপাদানই স্বল্পবয়সে গলটিকে টিকিয়ে রেখেছে। আওয়ামীর প্রতিফলন সময়ে তাই নতুন করে একটি প্রশ্ন সামনে এনেছে: দলের অভিজ্ঞ প্রজ্ঞন ধরনেনতা, চিত্তাঙ্গীল বুদ্ধিবৈজ্ঞানিক এবং বক্ষ সংগঠকেরা কতটা স্বল্পবয়সে সামনে আসবেন? তারা যদি সংগঠনের প্রত্যয়ে ঐক্য, শৃঙ্খলা এবং আর্থনিক শক্তিকে পুনঃস্থাপিত করতে সক্ষম হন, তবে আওয়ামী লীগ আবারও নতুন উন্মেষে এগিয়ে যেতে পারবে। দলের তৃণমূলের অনেক নেতৃত্ব ও সার্বিকভাবে সাধে কথা বলে এমন চিন্তাই পরিলক্ষিত হয়েছে।

বাংলাদেশের স্বাধীনতা সংগ্রামের ইতিহাসে তরুণ, স্বেচ্ছা এবং সাহসী নেতৃত্বই মূল চালিকাশক্তি হিসেবে কাজ করেছে। এই নেতৃত্ব শুধু রণাঙ্গনে বুদ্ধ পরিচালনা করেনি, তারা একই সঙ্গে আন্তর্জাতিক অঙ্গনেও কূটনৈতিক লড়াই চালিয়েছে। মুক্তিযুদ্ধের সময় সোভিয়েত ইউনিয়নের প্রেসিডেন্ট লিওনিদ ব্রেজনেভ, মার্কিন প্রেসিডেন্ট রিচার্ড নিক্সন, ব্রিটিশ প্রধানমন্ত্রী এডওয়ার্ড হিথ, ভারতের প্রধানমন্ত্রী ইন্দিরা গান্ধী, কানাডার প্রধানমন্ত্রী পিয়েরে বুকোসহ বিশ্বের বিভিন্ন দেশের সরকার, কূটনৈতিক এবং আন্তর্জাতিক গণমাধ্যমের সঙ্গে যোগাযোগ রক্ষা করতে হয়েছিল। মুক্তিযুদ্ধের প্রত্যয়ে বিশ্বজনন্য গড় ডোবলার অন্য আন্তর্জাতিক সিদ্ধির সামনে কথা কতে হয়েছে, যুক্তি তুলে ধরতে হয়েছে, কূটনৈতিক কৌশলযোগ্য কথায় রাখতে হয়েছে। তখনকার সেই তরুণ নেতৃত্ব অত্যন্ত বক্ষতর স্বপ্নে এই মাগিক পালন করেছিলেন। তাদের রাজনৈতিক বোধ, আন্তর্জাতিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি এবং যোগাযোগের দক্ষতা বাংলাদেশের মুক্তিযুদ্ধকে বৈশ্বিক সার্বিক এনে দিতে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা রেখেছিল।

কিন্তু বর্তমান সময়ে আওয়ামী লীগের নেতৃত্বের নিকে তাফালে অনেকের মনে প্রশ্ন জাগে: এই ঐতিহাসিক রাজনৈতিক দলের নেতৃত্ব কি সেই ঐতিহাসিক সক্ষমতা ধরে রাখতে সক্ষম? দলটির সার্বিক নেতা হিসেবে শেখ হাসিনা নিঃসন্দেহে আওয়ামী ও আন্তর্জাতিক রাজনীতিতে অভিজ্ঞ ও দৃঢ় নেতৃত্বের পরিচয় দিয়েছেন। কিন্তু তার স্বহস্তে দলের অনেক নেতার মাঝে সেই আন্তর্জাতিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি, কূটনৈতিক দক্ষতা কিংবা আর্থনিক রাজনৈতিক যোগাযোগের সক্ষমতা কতটা রয়েছে তা নিয়ে প্রশ্ন উঠেছে। আওয়ামীর রাজনীতি কেবল দেশের অভ্যন্তরের বিষয় নয়। বৈশ্বিক কৌশলযোগ্য, আন্তর্জাতিক কূটনীতি, গণমাধ্যম এবং ডিজিটাল যোগাযোগের ক্ষেত্রে একটি রাজনৈতিক দলের রাজনীতির ক্ষেত্র কার্যকর সারা বিশ্ব বিস্তৃত। এই ক্ষমতাবতার এমন নেতৃত্ব প্রয়োজন যারা আন্তর্জাতিক পরিসরে আওয়ামীর সঙ্গে কাজ করতে পারবেন, বাংলাদেশের মুক্তিযুদ্ধের চেতনা এবং আন্তর্জাতিক গণতান্ত্রিক রাজনীতিকে যুক্তির সঙ্গে তুলে ধরতে পারবেন।

সমালোচকদের মতে, আওয়ামী লীগের ক্ষেত্রে এমন কিছু নেতৃত্ব রয়েছে যাদের রাজনৈতিক সক্ষমতা, নৈতিকতা এবং প্রয়োগযোগ্যতা নিয়ে সন্দেহের মধ্যে প্রশ্ন রয়েছে। শীঘ্রই কর্মতার রাজনীতির সঙ্গে যুক্ত করার কালে কিছু নেতার বিরুদ্ধে পুনর্নির্বাচন, স্বল্পবয়সীতা কিংবা অস্বাভাবিক নেতৃত্বের অভিযোগও উঠে এসেছে। এই ক্ষমতাবতা দলটির সাংগঠনিক শক্তিকে দুর্বল করেছে। অন্যদিকে আওয়ামী লীগের রাজনীতির সঙ্গে বদবুদ্ধি পরিবার এক বিশেষ করে শেখ হাসিনার নেতৃত্ব গণীয়ভাবে অভিযোগ রয়েছে। দলের প্রত্যয়ে আবেগ, ইতিহাস এবং রাজনৈতিক ধারাবাহিকতার একটি বড় অংশ এই নেতৃত্বকে বিরোধিতা পড়ে উঠেছে। সেই কারণে শেখ হাসিনাকে কেন্দ্র করেই আওয়ামী লীগের অগ্রযাত্রা অব্যাহত থাকবে—এমন ধারণা অনেকের মাথোঁই রয়েছে।

## সংকট প্রহরে প্রাজ্ঞ ও কৌশলী নেতৃত্বের প্রত্যশায় আওয়ামী লীগ

তবে একই সঙ্গে এটিও সত্য যে শুধু আবেগ বা ঐতিহ্যের ওপর নির্ভর করে একটি রাজনৈতিক দল গীর্ষমেরাশে শক্তিশালী থাকতে পারে না। সময়ের বাস্তবতা অনুসরণী সংগঠনকে পরিবর্তিত হতে হয়, নতুন নেতৃত্ব তৈরি করতে হয় এবং রাজনৈতিক সংস্কৃতিকে আধুনিক করতে হয়। বর্তমান বাস্তবতায় জনৈকই সনে করুন অওয়ামী লীগের কেন্দ্রীয়, জেলা ও উপজেলা পর্যায়ের নতুন প্রজন্মের নেতৃত্বকে সামনে আনব প্রয়োজন। একই সঙ্গে সংগঠনের স্তরভেদে শৃঙ্খলা, স্বচ্ছতা এবং জবাবদিহি নিশ্চিত করাও অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। দেশটির ভেতরে দুর্নীতি, অযোয্যতা বা অস্বাভাবিকতার অভিযোগে অভিযুক্ত নেতাদের দ্বন্দ্বের পক্ষে ডিক্লেয়ার ব্যাপারে কার্যকরী কৌশলী ভূমিকা নিতে হবে যেন দৃশ্যমান হইকন প্রতিরোধ বাস্তবে দল তুলনামূলক বোধ্য নেতৃত্ব কেছে নিতে পারে। গণস্বাক্ষর ও স্বাধীনিক বোমারোপ মাধ্যমে কর্মী দলের সমর্থকদের ঝইয়ের বলয়ে সীকল অস্বাভাবিক ও বিরক্তিকর হয়ে গেছে তাদেরকে সরিয়ে নিতে হবে। ক্ষনে দলের সমর্থকদের বাইরের কনরকে প্রভাবিত করে সমর্থকদের চিন্তা রাখার উদ্দেশ্যে নিতে হবে।

বাংলাদেশের স্বাধীনতার সংগ্রামের ইতিহাস আমাদের একটি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ শিক্ষার মের। সংকটের সময় সাহসী, স্বা এবং দুরদর্শী নেতৃত্বই ইতিহাসের গতিপথ বলে দেয়। আন্দোলনের আওয়ামী লীগের অন্যতম সেই শিক্ষা প্রাসঙ্গিক। যদি দেশটি নতুন প্রজন্মের মেধাবী, স্বা, স্বচ্ছ এবং কূটনৈতিক দক্ষ নেতৃত্ব গড়ে তুলতে পারে, তবে বর্তমান বেকোনো সংকট বা বিপর্যয় মোকাবিলা করে অস্বাভাবিক শক্তিশালী রাজনৈতিক শক্তি হিসেবে অস্বাভাবিক কল্প সজ্জা অনস্বাভাবিক, সময়ের পরিবর্তনের সঙ্গে তাল মিলিয়ে নিজেদের পুনর্গঠন করতে ন পারলে একটি ঐতিহাসিক মল্লও ক্ষিরে ধীরে স্বাধীনিক দুর্বলতর মুখে লড়াতে পারে। তবই প্রায়টি আন শুধু সফলোচনার নয়—বরং আত্মসমালোচনা ও পুনর্গঠনের। আওয়ামী লীগ কি তার সুদে-মর নেতৃত্ব কালে নতুন মূল্যবোধকে নেতৃত্ব গড়ে তুলতে পারবে? যদি আওয়ামী লীগ এই সমসকে অস্বাভাবিকোচনা ও স্বাধীনিক সংকটের সুযোগ হিসেবে গ্রহণ করে, তবে দলটি অস্বাভাবিক শক্তিশালী ও সুসংগঠিত হয়ে উঠতে পারে। সংকটকে ভয় না পেয়ে, সেই সংকট থেকেই আওয়ামী লীগের সাংগঠনিক কাঠামোর নতুন বিকাশ ঘটুক।

লেখক: সংগঠক-জালালেশ আওয়ামী লীগ, পরিচালক-গভর্নেন্স পলিসি এক্সপ্লোর সেন্টার

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## স্বাধীনতার আহ্বান

সৈয়দ বেলাল সিদ্দিকী

সাত মার্চ, ১৯৭১।  
রোদঝারা রেসকোর্স ময়দান।  
কানায় পূর্ণ।

মাঠ ছাড়িয়ে মানুষ—  
রাজপথে, বৃষ্টির ডালে,  
ইমারতের চূড়ায়।

নগর পেরিয়ে  
দেশজুড়ে  
এক উত্তাল জনারণ্য।  
সবাই অপেক্ষায়।

নেতা আসবেন।  
বঙ্গবন্ধু আসবেন।  
মুজিব ভাই আসবেন।

দীর্ঘ প্রতীক্ষার পর  
স্টেজে উঠলেন তিনি।

কণ্ঠে প্রথমে নরম সুর—  
“ভাইয়েরা আমার।”

মুহূর্তে নেমে এলো  
অলৌকিক এক নীরবতা।

অরণ্যের বৃক্ষ, কৃষক, শ্রমিক,  
জেলে, ছাত্র, বুদ্ধিজীবী, কেরানি—  
শহর গঞ্জ, গ্রাম, সোনালী শস্য  
এক সারিতে দাঁড়িয়ে  
কান পেতে রইল।

তিনি বলতে লাগলেন—

এক দীর্ঘ কবিতা।

অপমানের ইতিহাস,  
ক্ষুধার ইতিহাস,  
অপেক্ষার ইতিহাস—  
সব জুড়ে  
মুখে মুখে লিখলেন  
এক মহাকাব্য।

তারপর বজ্রের মতো—  
“এবারের সংগ্রাম আমাদের মুক্তির সংগ্রাম।  
এবারের সংগ্রাম স্বাধীনতার সংগ্রাম।”

শেষে বললেন—  
জয় বাংলা।

সেই আহ্বান ছড়িয়ে পড়ল  
বিদ্যুতের মতো।

এক মুখ থেকে  
অসংখ্য মুখে।

টেকনাফ থেকে তেতুলিয়া—  
পাহাড়, নদী, সমুদ্র পেরিয়ে  
বেজে উঠল সেই ডাক।

শহরের ভিড়ের ভিতর  
প্রতিটি হৃদয়  
হঠাৎ উত্তাল হয়ে উঠল।

সেই ঘোষণা  
বিউগলের মতো তীব্র।  
প্রতিটি রক্তবাহী শিরায়  
প্রতিজ্ঞা স্থির হয়ে গেল।

নদীগুলো

উদ্দাম ঢেউ তুলে  
দিক ঠিক করে নিল।

অরণ্যের পাখিরা  
উড়ে গেল সমুদ্রের দিকে।

কৃষক ছাড়লেন জমি।  
শ্রমিক ছাড়লেন কারখানা।  
যুবক-যুবতী হাত ধরল হাতে।  
চোখে আগুন।

ঘরে ঘরে  
গড়ে উঠল দুর্গ।

শহর, গ্রাম, খাল, মাঠ  
একসঙ্গে উচ্চারণ করল—

স্বাধীনতা।  
স্বাধীনতা।  
স্বাধীনতা।

মানুষ নেমে এলো রাস্তায়।

পাহারা বসাল।  
বলল—

আমরা ভয়কে চিনি না।  
হত্যা, নিপিড়ন আমাদের থামাতে পারবে না।

বৃক্ষের ছায়া থেকে নদীর ধার  
শহর, গ্রাম, পাহাড়—  
সবাই মিলল  
এক ঝড়ের মতো।

ছাত্র-শিক্ষক, কৃষক-শ্রমিক, বৃদ্ধ—  
সবাই নেমে এলো  
এক মঞ্চে—  
স্বাধীনতা।

প্রতিটি শব্দ

প্রতিটি পদক্ষেপ  
হয়ে উঠল বিদ্রোহের সুর।  
মুক্তির সঙ্গীত।

প্রতিটি মানুষের রক্তে  
বয়ে যেতে লাগল  
এক অনন্ত লড়াই।  
এক অবিনশ্বর কবিতা।

মানুষ বলল—  
এবার আমরা হারব না।  
এবার আমরা নীরব থাকব না।

শালিখ কাকাতুয়া উড়ে গেল সমুদ্রের ওপারে।  
বৃক্ষ দুলাল বাতাসে।  
জনতা দাঁড়িয়ে রইল অদম্য সাহসে।

প্রত্যেকের চোখে  
এক নতুন সূর্য।

সেই দিনের আহ্বান  
আজও বাজে—  
নদীর জলে,  
ধানক্ষেতের বাতাসে,  
শহরের ধুলায়।

প্রতিটি মানুষের রক্তে  
আজও বয়ে যায়  
সেই বজ্রকণ্ঠ।

ইতিহাস জানে—  
একদিন  
একটি মানুষ  
একটি বাক্য বলেছিল—

আর একটি জাতি  
নিজের নাম  
পুনরায় উচ্চারণ করেছিল—

স্বাধীনতা।

## স্বাধীনতার আহ্বান

সৈয়দ বেলাল সিদ্দিকী  
কৃষিবিদ, কবি,  
সমসাময়িক বিষয়ের  
অনুসন্ধানী পর্যবেক্ষক  
এবং লেখক  
তার  
উল্লেখযোগ্য বইগুলোর  
মধ্যে রয়েছে  
কাব্যগ্রন্থ “চন্দনের  
কৌটৌয় ভালোবাসা”,  
“কার্তিকের পূর্ণিমা” এবং  
“পুনর্বার ফিরে আসা”



## পিতার মুখে লেপেট আছে ওয়াজের পোস্টার

-- নিয়াজ আল কাজী

১।

অজানা বা না-জানা ঘিয়ে-লাল ফল  
টিপে বেপর্দা করে দেখে নিই  
ভেতরের জ্বালা, ক্ষোভ- সব।  
এই তবে জীবনানন্দীয়  
বেত ফল নাকি?  
কখনো মেলে নাই চিনিবার অবসর;  
কাছে ডেকে কখনো গ্রামীণ বসুমতী  
খাস করে চেনায় নাই বেত ঝাড়।  
বা ইশারায় ডাকলেও আপন করে  
নেয় নাই কখনো এই শহুরে  
কবিয়ালে; মনে হয়েছে  
শ্রেফ বলার জন্যই বলা,  
আন্তরিকতাবিনা।

২।

ওয়াজের পোস্টার ছিঁড়ে  
আবার দেখে নিই ঢেকে যাওয়া  
ম্যুরালে নকশা করা পিতৃদেবের মুখ।  
কত বদলে গেছে দেশ! তবু  
পিতার মোটা হর্ন-রিম চশমা,  
জাঁদরেল গোর্ফ, কালো পাইপ,  
ট্রেডমার্ক কোট, ব্যাকব্রাশ,  
আর রাত-দুপুরের ব্রাশফায়ারে  
ঝাঁঝরা হওয়া আটপৌরে সাদা পাঞ্জাবি  
মোটোও নয় আনকোরা।

৩।

শীতের শুরুতে বয়সের ভারে  
নুয়ে থাকে থুথুরে বুড়ো পাতা-  
এমনই সব বৃক্ষের বুননে  
চলতে ক্ষণে  
থমকে থাকি আমি, হয়ে যাই আনমনা,  
আধা-গঞ্জ আধা-গাঁ ছাড়া এই রাঙা মাটির পথে।



নিয়াজ  
আল কাজী

একজন কবি,  
গবেষক ও

রাজনৈতিক

পর্যবেক্ষক। তিনি

বর্তমানে যুক্তরাষ্ট্রের  
হার্ভার্ড বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ে

জনপ্রশাসন ও

নীতিনির্ধারণ বিষয়ে

অধ্যয়নরত।

ভালোবাসেন মুক্তিযুদ্ধ

ও বঙ্গবন্ধুকে।

# জন্মদিনে আইভি রহমান

তোমাকে জন্মদিনের শুভেচ্ছা জানাবো বলে  
পঞ্চাশ বছর ধরে অপেক্ষা আমার।  
সেই কবে থেকে প্রতিবার তোমার জন্মদিনে  
আমি নিজেকে সাজাই নিখুঁত করে,  
বার আয়না দেখি পছন্দ না হলে আবার সাজি  
এই করে পেরিয়ে এলাম 'বিশ হাজার অষ্ট আশি দিন'

কিন্তু একবারও তোমার কাছে যেয়ে  
তোমাকে আদর করে বলা হয়ে ওঠেনি 'শুভ জন্মদিন'।  
যতবার নিজেকে তৈরি করে গেছি তোমার দ্বারে  
ততবার ফিরে এসেছি বুক ভরা অভিমান নিয়ে।  
তারপর হাতের ফুল গুলো রেখে দিয়েছি মনের গোপন কোনে  
লুকানো চন্দন কাঠের নীল বাক্সে।  
শুকিয়ে কাঠ হয়ে থাকা ফুল গুলো আমাকে কত কি যে  
জিজ্ঞাসা করেছে,  
কত বার বলেছে কেন ওদের এই ভাবে রেখে দিয়েছি এত গুলো  
বছর!  
ওদের আমি কিছুই বলিনি শুধু আলতো করে হাত বুলিয়ে  
খুব যতনে আবার ঘুম পাড়িয়ে দিয়েছি চন্দন বাক্সে।

কি করে ওদের বলব আমার এই লজ্জার কথা।  
কি করে জানাবো আমি কেন যেতে পারিনা তোমার কাছে।  
আমার পথে কে দাঁড়িয়ে থাকে, আমাকে থমকে দিয়ে  
কার হিংস্র থাবা গ্রাস করতে চায় আমার আমিত্ব,  
কার ভয়াল দর্শন অবয়ব আমাকে ধাক্কা দিয়ে  
ফেলে দেয় বার তোমার থেকে দূরে,  
কি করে বলব আমি, কার জঘন্য লোলুপ দৃষ্টি  
আমাকে চিরে দেখে বার, আমি শঙ্কিত হই।

আমার যাওয়া হয়েই ওঠেনা তোমার জন্মদিনে।  
ওরা তোমাকে ঘিরে থাকে। ঘিরে আছে।  
সেই থেকে আজ অবধি। ওদের হাতে তুমি বন্দি।  
কারাগারের শৃঙ্খলিত জীবনে তুমি আবদ্ধ,  
যদিও ভাব দেখাও তুমি স্বাধীন।  
কিন্তু ভেতরে তোমার কান্না আকাশ কালো করে রাখে।  
বাতাস হাসতে ভুলে যায় প্রাণ খুলে।  
ফুলেরা ফুটে ঠিকই কিন্তু তাতে আঁবির রঙ ঢালেনা।  
নদী বয়ে যায় উদাসীন অমসৃণ প্রাণহীন।  
পাখিদের কৃজনে আগের সেই মিষ্টতা নেই।  
মানুষের প্রানে নেই খুশির ঝর্ণা ধারা।

তারপর এক সময় তোমার ভেতরে জেগে উঠলো প্রতিরোধের  
আগুন।  
তুমি উন্মত্ত হলে। তারুণ্যের উচ্ছল জোয়ার তোমাকে সাহস  
জোগালো  
তোমার কানে বললো ভয় নেই তোমার আমরা পাশে আছি।  
তুমি জেগে উঠলে। আমাকে ডাকলে।  
আমি অভিমান ভুলে আবার সাজতে বসলাম সবটুকু ভালবাসা  
দিয়ে।  
আমার এবারের সাজ তোমার জন্মদিনে আমার উপহার।  
আমার এবারের প্রসাধন তোমার মুক্তির আনন্দের জন্য।  
আমার এবারের ফুল তোমার পায়ে অর্ঘ্য,  
দেঁরি করে হলেও তোমার বোধদয়ের জন্য যে,  
ওদের বিচার করতে হবে। ওদের চূড়ান্ত শাস্তি দিতে হবে।  
যা ওরা করেছিল আমাদের সাথে  
সেই অতীত ক্ষতে লোবানের সুবাস মাখানোর দিন আগত

প্রায়।  
তুমি শেষ পর্যন্ত ওদের বিচার কাজ সম্পন্ন করতে চলেছো।  
এর জন্য আমাদের দিতে হচ্ছে অজস্র প্রান আজ আবার  
নতুন করে  
কিন্তু তাতে ওরা আমাদের বা তোমাকে আজ আর দমাতে  
পারবে না।  
আজ আমাদের প্রানের ধারা একই সুরে গাইতে শুরু করেছে  
নতুন করে।  
তাতে আর কোন হস্তক্ষেপ বরদাস্ত করা হবে না।

এই প্রথম বার নিজেকে বড় সুন্দর লাগে আয়নার সামনে  
দাঁড়িয়ে।  
এই প্রথম নিজেকে বলি তুমি সার্থক।  
এই প্রথম এঁ শুকনো ফুল গুলোকে আদর করে বুক ধরে বলি  
আর বাক্স বন্দিত্ব নয় এবার অর্ঘ্য দেব জন্মদিনে তার,  
যার জন্য এই অনন্ত অপেক্ষা আমার।  
যার বুক মিশে আছে আমার ভাইয়ের লাল রক্ত।  
যার উদার সবুজে আমার মায়ের সপ্তম।  
যার প্রতিদিনের সূর্যের কিরণে আমাদের সুস্থ নিঃশ্বাস।  
হে আমার অমর স্বাধীনতা তোমাকে 'শুভ জন্মদিন'!!

## আইভি রহমান।

অস্ট্রেলিয়ার ক্যানবেরায় বাস করেন  
আইভি রহমান। আইনবিদ, কবি, ছোটগল্প,  
স্মৃতিকথা, জাতিগত জীবন ও সংস্কৃতি নিয়ে লেখা লেখি  
করেন। তাঁর লেখা বইয়ের মধ্যে রয়েছে The Poet of Poli-  
tics, Heart on Fire, সম্পর্কের ফসিল ইত্যাদি।



# THE PHOENIX AND THE FIRE: SHEIKH HASINA'S LEGACY OF TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY

Dr. Rafiq Shahariar\*

## Introduction

The arc of modern Bangladesh is inextricably linked to the life and political career of Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving prime minister in the nation's history. Her story is one of almost mythic proportions: the daughter of the nation's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, forced into exile after a brutal military coup that massacred her entire immediate family; a return to a homeland under authoritarian rule; a political career punctuated by assassination attempts; and a fifteen-year stretch of uninterrupted governance (2009–2024) that transformed the country's economic and social landscape. Yet, this era culminated in a dramatic, chaotic fall on August 5, 2024, when she was forced to flee to India amidst a student-led uprising, leaving behind a legacy as contested as it is colossal.

The central question that haunts this narrative is not merely what happened, but why. Why did a leader who oversaw unprecedented economic growth, earned global recognition for climate leadership and diplomacy, and pulled millions out of poverty become the target of a popular uprising that led to her ouster? The explanations are polarised. Her detractors, both domestic and international, frame her final years as a period of "fascism", a regime defined by the suppression of dissent, extrajudicial killings by security forces, and the systematic dismantling of democratic institutions (1). Her supporters, meanwhile, argue that her governance was a necessary, if sometimes harsh, response to a complex state system plagued by Islamist militancy, the legacy of anti-liberation forces, and the persistent threat of destabilisation. They posit that the very development and stability she engineered required a strong hand to keep the nation on track, and that her patriotism was the driving force behind Bangladesh's emergence as a unique and prosperous nation on the global stage.

The fall of Sheikh Hasina was not the result of a spontaneous moral reckoning between an autocratic ruler and a virtuous citizenry. Rather, it was engineered through a confluence of factors: a global conspiracy that emboldened opposition forces, a meticulously designed campaign orchestrated by anti-liberation actors, sustained local opposition, and the compounding effects of internal weakness and systemic corruption within the government itself. Using theoretical frameworks of authoritarian developmentalism, post-colonial state theory, conspiracy theory, and the political economy of patronage, this article will analyse the two-decade arc of Hasina's rule (1996–2024, with focus on 2009–2024). It will explore the four pillars of her legacy—development, diplomacy, climate policy, and the unification of education—while simultaneously dissecting the authoritarian turn that created a simmering cauldron of political grievance, economic inequality, and institutional decay, ultimately leading to her downfall. The analysis will conclude that Sheikh Hasina's Bangladesh was a nation built at an unsustainable political cost, where the engine of progress was fueled by the very forces that would eventually consume it.

## Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding the Authoritarian Developmental State

To understand the Sheikh Hasina era, one must move beyond the simplistic binaries of "good development" versus "bad politics". Several theoretical lenses offer a more nuanced understanding of her governance model. These frameworks help explain the paradox of a regime that delivered significant economic growth while simultaneously eroding democratic institutions and cultivating a culture of fear.

### 2.1. The Authoritarian Developmental State (ADS)

The concept of the "developmental state" pioneered by Chalmers Johnson in the context of post war Japan and later applied to the "Asian Tigers" (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong), describes a state where bureaucratic elites prioritize economic growth and industrial policy, often with a high degree of state intervention and a suspension of full democratic contestation (2). In its authoritarian iteration, this model posits that rapid economic transformation can be achieved by a centralised, autonomous state that insulates economic policy from populist pressures. Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew is the archetypal example, where political freedoms were traded for economic security and stability (3). Sheikh Hasina's Bangladesh, particularly after 2009, exhibited clear characteristics of this model. The government set ambitious economic targets, invested heavily in mega-infrastructure projects (e.g., the Padma Bridge, the Dhaka Metro Rail Project), and pursued a pro-business policy that transformed Bangladesh into one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia, lifting over 25 million people out of poverty. However, critics argue this was accompanied by a systematic weakening of checks and balances—the judiciary, the Election Commission, and civil society—to ensure policy continuity and regime survival. The Digital Security Act (2018) became a potent weapon to silence critics, while elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024 were marred by low turnout, violence, and opposition boy-

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cotts. The question that the ADS framework poses is whether the economic gains justified the uprising, which demonstrated that—development without freedom rests on a weak foundation (4).

### 2.2. The Political Economy of Patronage and Neopatrimonialism

While the ADS framework explains the state's developmental ambitions, the concept of neopatrimonialism explains the internal power dynamics that drove the Awami League (AL) regime. South Asian politics is often characterised by clientelism, where political support is exchanged for material benefits (5). Under Sheikh Hasina, this evolved into a form of what scholars term—hyper-clientelism or a—neopatrimonial system, where the distinction between the public sphere and private patrimony collapses. The Awami League party grew to control not just the state apparatus but also a vast network of business interests, from the garment industry to infrastructure projects. This created a powerful ruling coalition funded by crony capitalism, but it also bred endemic corruption and the concentration of wealth (6). Reports indicate that tycoons linked to the Hasina regime siphoned billions from the banking sector, contributing to a massive buildup of bad loans (7). The party attracted people from various sectors—sports, films, media, and academia—rewarding loyalty with parliamentary seats, which often marginalised veteran political leaders who had practised politics their entire lives.

This led to the perception that the party became a “club” for the elite. The concentration of power was further symbolised by the involvement of the Sheikh family in key party posts, such as the appointments of family members to leadership positions in the party (Jubo League and Awami League), which critics argued deprived qualified individuals of opportunities and consolidated a dynastic structure. This framework helps explain why, despite macroeconomic growth, the perceived economic well-being of the middle and lower classes became precarious, fueling the discontent that erupted in 2024.

### Post-Colonial State, Liberation War Legacy, and Moral Populism

Bangladesh's political culture is deeply haunted by its traumatic birth in 1971. The liberation war against Pakistan created a foundational political cleavage: between those who champion the secular, nationalist legacy of the Awami League (the “liberation forces”) and those associated with Islamist politics and the military regimes that opposed this legacy (the “anti-liberation forces”) (8). Sheikh Hasina framed her entire political project as a continuation of the unfinished work of her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and as a defence of the spirit of the 1971 war against those who sought to undo it.

This Manichean worldview—*us versus the enemies of the nation*—became the primary ideological justification for taking some authoritarian measures. It allowed her to cast political opponents not as legitimate rivals but as conspirators against the state itself. During the 2024 student protests, a false propaganda was spread that Sheikh Hasina labelled the demonstrators “Razakars” (a term for collaborators during the 1971 war), a move that drastically inflamed tensions by framing a youth movement for job quotas as a betrayal of the nation's founding (9). Scholars argue that this approach cultivated a culture of fear and “moral populism” that reduced complex governance issues to stark binaries, activating the “point-and-shoot” moral instincts of the population. While this strategy successfully demobilised opposition for years by delegitimising dissent as anti-national, it ultimately left the polity deeply divided and primed for conflict when the economic foundations of the regime began to show apparent weakness (10).

### The Architect of a New Bangladesh – The Case for Hasina's Patriotism and Progress

For millions of Bangladeshis, Sheikh Hasina was not a dictator but the architect of the nation's long-overdue renaissance. Her supporters point to tangible, often monumental, achievements that transformed Bangladesh from a “basket case” (a term infamously used by Henry Kissinger) into an economic powerhouse and a respected middle-income country (11).

### 3.1. Economic Transformation and Infrastructure

When Sheikh Hasina returned to power in 2009, Bangladesh was still struggling with political instability, a fragile economy, and the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Over the next 15 years, she oversaw an economic miracle. The country's GDP grew at an average of over 6.5% for a decade, crossing 8% in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic (12). Bangladesh surpassed India and Pakistan in key economic indicators like GDP per capita. The poverty rate dropped from nearly 40% in 2009 to under 20% by 2022 (13). This was achieved through a combination of robust export growth, a booming microfinance sector, and large-scale social safety net programs.

The Hasina government pursued an aggressive, state-led infrastructure drive. The Padma Bridge, a 6.15 km multi-purpose road-

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rail bridge built with the country's own funds after the World Bank cancelled financing over corruption allegations, became a potent symbol of national self-reliance and the country's political will (14). The Dhaka Metro Rail, the elevated expressway, Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, and the Matarbari deep-sea port signified a modernisation of the country's core infrastructure.

### 3.2. Diplomacy and Global Prestige

On the world stage, Sheikh Hasina transformed Bangladesh's image from a country associated with poverty, cyclones, and political coups to a model for development and a key voice for the Global South. Inheriting the political legacy of her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a steadfast supporter of the oppressed and a vocal opponent of imperialism and capitalism, Hasina continued this tradition by championing the cause of the poor and dispossessed.<sup>2</sup> She emerged as an outspoken advocate for Palestinian freedom and a principled critic of Israeli imperialism, positions that often placed her at odds with major powers such as the United States.<sup>15</sup> Her unwavering stance earned her admiration across the developing world; former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad once described her as the "voice of the Third World".

What distinguished Hasina's diplomacy was her rare ability to balance competing global interests while advancing Bangladesh's developmental priorities. She skillfully maintained strategic partnerships with China, India, and Russia, while simultaneously managing relations with Western powers such as the United States and Japan (16). This capacity to navigate complex geopolitical terrain for the benefit of her country reflected a remarkable statesmanship.

When over 700,000 Rohingya refugees fled a military crackdown in Myanmar in 2017, Sheikh Hasina opened Bangladesh's borders, demonstrating a humanitarian commitment that won global praise (17). She personally led the diplomatic effort to keep the crisis on the international agenda, earning accolades from the United Nations and world leaders, even as the long-term burden strained Bangladesh's resources and environment. Her leadership in climate diplomacy was equally outstanding. As one of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations, Sheikh Hasina made Bangladesh a leading advocate for climate justice. She chaired the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), a coalition of 48 nations, pushing for industrialised countries to honour their commitments on loss and damage. Her government invested heavily in adaptation strategies—building cyclone shelters, promoting saline-tolerant crops, and strengthening early warning systems—which significantly reduced disaster-related mortality (18).

### 3.3. Social and Educational Unification

Sheikh Hasina pursued policies aimed at modernising society, curbing the influence of Islamist factions, and accommodating all sections of the people under the umbrella of development. One of her most significant, albeit contentious, reforms was the unification of the madrasa (Islamic school) education system with the mainstream national curriculum. This was a direct challenge to the Islamist opposition. By integrating madrasa students into the national exam system (Ebtedayee, Dakhil, Alim), the state aimed to standardise education, curb extremism, and bring millions of students into a more secular, science-oriented framework (19). By 2023, over 2.5 million students were enrolled in the mainstreamed madrasa system, with access to government textbooks covering science, mathematics, and English alongside religious instruction.

This reform was complemented by the government's broader education strategy, which included increasing the education budget from 2.1% of GDP in 2009 to 2.5% by 2023, establishing over 100 new public universities across the country, and introducing free textbooks for all primary and secondary students—a program that distributed over 300 million free textbooks annually (20). While hailed by progressive circles as a progressive step toward educational equity and modernisation, it was seen by conservative Islamists as a state assault on religious education (21). The reform encountered resistance from powerful Qawmi madrasa networks, which continued to operate outside the formal system. However, even among Qawmi institutions, a gradual shift occurred, with several issuing formal certifications recognised by the government—a process facilitated by the establishment of the Government-recognised Qawmi Madrasa Board in 2018.

### 3.4. Women's Empowerment and Social Transformation

The government's policies, particularly in the garment industry and in rural development, had a profound impact on women. Micro-credit programs, stipends for female students, and the vast employment of women in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which accounts for over 80% of Bangladesh's exports, led to significant gains in female literacy, workforce participation, and a decline in fertility rates. Under Hasina's regime between 2009 and 2023, female labour force participation increased from 26% to 36%, with the RMG sector alone employing over 4 million women (22). The government's stipend program for female students at the secondary and higher

secondary levels contributed to closing the gender gap in education, achieving near-parity in enrollment by 2020. The fertility rate dropped from 2.7 children per woman in 2009 to 2.0 by 2023, a decline directly linked to increased female education and economic participation (23).

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These achievements were further reinforced by legal reforms, including the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2010) and the expansion of social safety nets targeting women-headed households. By 2023, over 10 million women were beneficiaries of government social protection programs, including allowances for widows, destitute women, and lactating mothers (24).

### 3.5 The Crushing of Militancy and Anti-Liberation Forces

For Hasina and her supporters, the fight against militancy and the —anti-liberation forces— was not just political; it was existential. The 1975 coup that killed her family was led by individuals opposed to the secular, nationalist vision of Bangladesh (25). In the decades that followed, military rulers like Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad rehabilitated these anti-liberation elements, including the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, into the mainstream political fold (26). Hasina's tenure saw a determined campaign to dismantle these networks. In 2010, her government established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to prosecute war criminals from the 1971 liberation war. This led to the trial and execution of several top leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), including Abdul Quader Mollah (executed in 2013), known as the 'Butcher of Mirpur,' and Jamaat-e-Islami leader Motiur Rahman Nizami (executed in 2016).

By 2023, the ICT had convicted and sentenced 23 individuals for crimes against humanity committed during the 1971 war, with 11 of those convicted executed. For the pro-liberation segment of society, this was long-overdue justice after decades of impunity. For the opposition, it was a politically motivated witch hunt designed to decapitate her rivals, a claim the government consistently rejected, pointing to the judicial independence of the tribunal (27). Following a spate of brutal Islamist attacks, including the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack in Dhaka that killed 22 people (including 17 foreigners), the Hasina government launched a sweeping crackdown on militant groups. The attack, claimed by ISIS-affiliated Neo-JMB, marked a turning point in Bangladesh's counterterrorism approach. The security forces successfully dismantled the operational capabilities of groups like JMB (Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh) and Ansar al-Islam. Between 2016 and 2023, security operations led to the arrest of over 5,000 suspected militants, the killing of approximately 150 in "gunfights" (often contested), and the disruption of multiple planned attacks. By 2023, Bangladesh was widely recognized as having significantly reduced the threat of domestic terrorism, with no major attacks reported since 2017. However, this campaign was also marked by allegations of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, a point of major international criticism. Human rights organizations documented hundreds of cases of individuals allegedly abducted by security forces between 2016 and 2023, many of whom were never seen again. The United States imposed sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in 2021 under the Global Magnitsky Act, citing credible evidence of human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. The government maintained that these operations were necessary to dismantle militant networks and that any abuses were isolated incidents not reflecting state policy (28).

### The Fall – Anatomy of an Uprising (July–August 2024)

The fall of Sheikh Hasina was not a sudden event, but it was a calculated and long term efforts by many of the fronts who opposed her rule, including two major political parties: BNP and Jamat, who have been out of power for decades. The spark was a seemingly minor student protest against a controversial quota system for government jobs. However, the fuel was the pent-up rage against authoritarianism, economic precarity, and political repression. The students who took to the streets in July 2024 were not the traditional political opposition. They were a new generation, born after the 1971 war, who had no direct memory of the liberation struggle that formed the bedrock of the AL's legitimacy. They had grown up under Hasina's rule and experienced first-hand the contradiction between a digitally connected world and a state that suppressed digital rights. They were frustrated by a job market that, despite high GDP growth, could not absorb the millions of educated youth. The quota system, which reserved a significant portion of government jobs for descendants of "freedom fighters" (a group seen as overwhelmingly pro-AL), became a symbol of an entrenched, dynastic political system that denied opportunities based on merit.

The government's initial response was peaceful, but that eventually turned violent to crack down with lethal force. The use of live ammunition, mass arrests, and a complete internet shutdown (a tactic used repeatedly during Hasina's tenure) escalated the protests from a student movement to a nationwide insurrection. The killing of hundreds of protesters transformed the young demonstrators into martyrs. The state's coercive apparatus, once effective in silencing small pockets of dissent, proved incapable of managing a mass movement fueled by a sense of moral outrage and shared grievance across class and generational lines. The final blow came from a crucial institution: the army. The Bangladeshi military, which Sheikh Hasina had carefully cultivated and whose loyalty she had assumed was secure, refused to fire on the unarmed populace. Faced with a popular uprising that showed no signs of abating and a military that was no longer willing to enforce her will, Hasina was left with no option. On August 5, 2024, she resigned and fled in a military aircraft to India. The 15-year —Hasina eral ended not with a gradual transition of power, but with a dramatic collapse.

### The International Dimension – The Role of "Native and Foreign" Actors

The question of foreign influence is a persistent theme in the discourse around her ouster. While the primary drivers of the uprising were domestic, a complex web of international actors played a significant role in shaping the context and the outcome. The United States' stance towards the Hasina government had noticeably soured in the years leading up to her fall. The sanctions on the RAB were a clear signal of displeasure. More significantly, the US government, through its embassy in Dhaka and its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, expressed consistent concern over the lack of free and fair elections. Some analysts suggest that the US policy, which openly called for a "free and fair" election, was interpreted by the AL government as an attempt to engineer regime change. While there is no evidence of direct US operational involve-

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ment in the protests, the withdrawal of political and moral support for the Hasina government in its final years created a space for the opposition and civil society to mobilise with less fear of state retribution backed by a superpower.

India was Sheikh Hasina's most crucial international ally, sheltering her after the 1975 coup and supporting her throughout her political career. Hasina's pro-India stance, her efforts to curb anti-India insurgencies operating from Bangladeshi soil (such as the United Liberation Front of Asom, ULFA), and her management of border security made her an indispensable partner for New Delhi.<sup>29</sup> India's initial support for the Hasina government in the face of the protests was steadfast. However, as the movement grew and the military signalled its unwillingness to continue backing Hasina, India was forced to pivot. The decision to allow her to flee to India was a strategic move to ensure a managed transition and preserve its influence in a post-Hasina Bangladesh. India's role was thus one of a key patron whose long-term support had bolstered Hasina's rule, but whose inability or unwillingness to intervene decisively at the end contributed to her downfall.

Pakistan and other Islamist-leaning states have long been accused by the AL of supporting anti-liberation forces within Bangladesh. While there is no concrete evidence of state-sponsored intervention in the 2024 uprising, the fall of Sheikh Hasina was undeniably celebrated by Islamist parties and their supporters who had been sidelined during her rule. The narrative that "foreign hands" were involved was a key component of the AL's effort to delegitimise the movement. This claim points to the enduring geopolitical fault line of the 1971 war, which continues to shape Bangladesh's political identity. In this view, the anti-liberation forces, both native and foreign, never accepted Bangladesh as a secular, sovereign state and saw Hasina's ouster as an opportunity to reverse the gains of the liberation war.

### Foreign Involvement and the Yunus Connection

The most compelling evidence of external orchestration in the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government came from an unlikely source: the very man who became the head of the interim administration. In September 2024, speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting in the United States, Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus publicly acknowledged that the movement which toppled Hasina was not a spontaneous uprising but a —meticulously designed operation.<sup>30</sup> —It just didn't happen suddenly, Yunus told the audience. —Very well-designed. Even the leadership didn't know (him), so they could not catch him (31).

Yunus's admission gave voice to what many analysts had long suspected: the July–August 2024 protests were the product of a coordinated campaign involving both domestic opposition forces and external actors. The confession was all the more striking because it came from the chief beneficiary of the regime change, who had assumed power as head of the interim government just weeks after Hasina's ouster.

Dr Yunus had a history of political ambition that predated the 2024 movement. In 2007, during the military-backed caretaker government, he launched the Nagorik Shakti (Citizens' Power) party, positioning himself as a non-partisan reformer. The initiative collapsed after a few months due to a lack of public support and resistance from established political parties, but it revealed his enduring interest in political leadership. His relationship with the Awami League government was consistently adversarial. When the government moved to enforce retirement laws at Grameen Bank, Yunus was forced to step down as its managing director in 2011—a decision he later described as a "political vendetta" orchestrated by Sheikh Hasina (32). Throughout the following decade, the Hasina administration pursued legal cases against Yunus, including allegations of tax evasion and labour law violations. By 2024, he faced multiple court cases, some of which carried prison sentences (33). These grievances, combined with his long-standing connections to Western political circles and development institutions, positioned Yunus as a natural focal point for forces seeking regime change. His Nobel Prize gave him international credibility, and his network spanned influential foundations, US government agencies, and multilateral organisations.

Yunus's own words at the Clinton Global Initiative dismantle any narrative of a purely spontaneous student uprising. By describing the movement as —meticulously designed and revealing that even its nominal leaders were unaware of the mastermind behind it, he confirmed what critics had alleged: that the protests were not a leaderless movement but a carefully managed operation with hidden coordination. The venue of the admission—a high-profile event in the United States hosted by the Clinton Foundation—added geopolitical weight. The Clinton family has been deeply involved in Bangladesh affairs for decades, and the Global Initiative has served as a platform for Western-backed civil society initiatives globally. Yunus's choice to make such a revelation on that stage suggested a level of comfort with his international backers.

### Broader Foreign Involvement

Yunus's confession was part of a larger pattern of foreign pressure on the Hasina government. The United States had imposed visa restrictions on Bangladeshi officials in May 2023, citing concerns about electoral integrity, and had sanctioned the elite Rapid Action Battalion under the Global Magnitsky Act in December 2021 (34). Several Western governments, including the US and the UK, had funded civil society organisations and democracy-promotion programmes in Bangladesh that were accused of fomenting dissent. The USAID-funded "Nagorik" project, run through the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), was singled out by critics as a mechanism for training activists who later played roles in the protest movement. Although the project was officially described as civic engagement, its alumni were reported to be disproportionately represented among the protest organisers. Local organisations, academicians who pursued their education from the US institutions, also played a considerable role in staging this conspiracy for overthrowing the government using the peaceful students' movement.

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### Conclusion

The Unresolved Legacy Sheikh Hasina's legacy stands as one of the most consequential in Bangladesh's history—a legacy of towering achievements shadowed by profound contradictions. She was, by any objective measure, a transformative leader whose vision reshaped a nation once dismissed as a “basket case” into a development miracle that commanded global respect. Under her stewardship, Bangladesh achieved milestones that seemed impossible at the turn of the century. It became a global benchmark for poverty reduction, lifting over 25 million people out of poverty. It emerged as a model for women's empowerment, with millions of women entering the workforce and achieving educational parity with men. It led the developing world in climate adaptation, pioneering resilience strategies that saved countless lives. The Padma Bridge, built with the nation's own resources against formidable international opposition, stands not merely as a feat of engineering but as a monument to her unyielding will and fierce patriotism.

On the world stage, Sheikh Hasina gave Bangladesh a voice that was previously unimaginable. She was the voice of the Global South, the champion of climate justice, the humanitarian who opened her borders to nearly a million Rohingya refugees when no other nation would. She navigated the treacherous currents of great power politics with rare skill, securing development partnerships with China, India, Japan, and Russia while managing relations with the United States and Europe—all without compromising Bangladesh's sovereignty.

For this, a vast portion of the population—the rural poor who found economic opportunity, the women who gained dignity and independence, the middle class who tasted prosperity, the millions who crossed the poverty line—holds her in profound gratitude. Her image in their hearts is not that of an autocrat but of the mother who fed them when they were hungry and built roads where there were only dirt paths.

Yet, the manner of her departure and the political system she constructed tell a different story—a story not of spontaneous popular rejection but of calculated conspiracy. The fall of 2024 was not the collapse of a populist leader under the weight of economic failure; it was the culmination of a meticulously designed campaign orchestrated by a coalition of domestic opposition forces and international actors who had long sought her removal. Dr Muhammad Yunus, the man who assumed power in her absence, confessed as much when he declared the movement—meticulously designed at the Clinton Global Initiative. The tragedy of her fall is not that she was defeated by the people she served, but that she was brought down by forces that had systematically undermined her government for years.

The core question of her governance—whether she personally ordered state violence or whether a complex state apparatus acted beyond her direct command—is itself a reflection of the system she built. In a governance model that prioritised stability and development above all, the line between leader and system blurred. The regime's commitment to eradicating militancy, prosecuting war criminals, and dismantling anti-liberation forces required, in its logic, a firm hand. Yet the same apparatus that brought justice to the killers of 1971 also, at times, trampled the rights of its citizens. The killings of protesters in July and August 2024, like the enforced disappearances of the previous decade, became the tragic cost of a governance model that placed regime security alongside national development.

Sheikh Hasina's story is, in the deepest sense, a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. A woman who survived the brutal assassination of her entire family—her father, her mother, her brothers—on a night of bloodshed in 1975, returned from exile to lead her shattered nation toward prosperity and pride. She fought the forces that had murdered her family, that had sought to erase Bangladesh's liberation spirit, that had collaborated with the Pakistani army in 1971. Her unyielding commitment to the ideals of the liberation war, her patriotic fervour, her determination to lift her people from poverty—these were genuine, fierce, and unshakeable.

And yet, these very qualities—combined with an absolutist political philosophy, a state apparatus devoid of effective checks and balances, and an unwavering belief that only she could protect the nation from its enemies—morphed into a system that ultimately devoured the democratic ideals her father had laid down his life for. She became, in the end, both the guardian of the liberation war's legacy and the ruler whose methods alienated the generation that inherited that legacy.

Now, in the post-Hasina era, Bangladesh faces a vacuum—and a warning. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus has already revealed its character: disrespect for the liberation spirit, vandalism of monuments and symbols that embody Bangladesh's birth, and arrests of freedom fighters whose only crime was their sacrifice for the nation. Jamaat-e-Islami, the very party convicted of war crimes, has been revived, given space to take its revenge for the trials Hasina courageously pursued. Minority communities live under threat. The secular fabric painstakingly preserved through decades of struggle is being torn apart.

In the face of this, the question of Sheikh Hasina's legacy becomes not merely academic but urgent. Was she the patriot who built a nation or the autocrat who broke it? The answer, like the woman herself, is not binary. She was both—and she was more. She was the architect of a new, prosperous Bangladesh, a nation that emerged from the ashes of poverty to stand tall among the community of nations. She elevated Bangladesh on the world stage while struggling to preserve its democratic soul at home. She gave millions hope, jobs, and dignity, even as her governance model became increasingly insular and unaccountable.

Her reign stands as a stark lesson for developing nations: development without democratic deepening, progress without institutional accountability, and stability without genuine participation are ultimately fragile. But it also stands as an enduring testament to what determined leadership can achieve against overwhelming odds. The forces that brought her down—domestic and international, political and ideological—were

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formidable, long-planned, and relentless. That she held them at bay for fifteen years, transforming her country beyond recognition in the process, is itself a measure of her extraordinary will.

For generations to come, the legacy of Sheikh Hasina will be debated, celebrated, and mourned. Her defenders will point to the bridges, the roads, the ports, the schools, the millions lifted from destitution. Her critics will point to the silenced voices, the curtailed freedoms, the lives lost. But no honest reckoning can deny that she was a transformative figure—perhaps the most significant in Bangladesh's history since her father. She was the architect of a new Bangladesh, even if that architecture proved politically fragile.

The furies that rose against her in 2024 were not the spontaneous eruption of a populace finally freed from oppression; they were the product of a meticulously designed campaign that exploited genuine grievances while serving interests far removed from the welfare of ordinary Bangladeshis. That her government's contradictions provided the openings for such a campaign does not diminish the tragedy of her fall—nor does it diminish her achievements.

In the end, Sheikh Hasina's story is one of triumph and tragedy intertwined. She who survived a massacre to lead her nation was, after fifteen years of transformative rule, forced once more to flee for her life. She who fought tirelessly for the spirit of 1971 watched, from exile, as that spirit was mocked and vandalised. But the Bangladesh she built—economically resilient, globally respected, socially transformed—cannot be undone by those who seized power through design rather than democratic mandate. Her legacy is etched not only in the institutions she built but in the lives of millions who now understand that poverty is not their destiny, that their nation can stand tall among the world's powers, that their children can dream beyond the horizon.

That legacy will endure. And in the long arc of Bangladesh's history, her place is secure—not as a figure without flaw, but as the leader who, against all odds, lifted her nation from the bottom of the world's table to its middle, who gave it pride, who made it impossible to ignore. Whatever the verdict of history, Sheikh Hasina will be remembered as the architect of modern Bangladesh—a patriot who built, a fighter who endured, a daughter of Bengal who, like her father before her, gave everything for her people.

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