

Book Review

Bangabandhu and Bangladesh, Sharif uddin Ahmed (ed.), (Dhaka: The University Press Limited and North South University 2021), pp. 432, price: Tk. 1400/-

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the greatest Bengali ever born. He is the father of the Bengali nation and the creator of the Bangladesh nation-state. Had there been no bold, undaunted, inspiring and fathomless patriotic leadership of him, there would have no Bangladesh state. It would still remain a colony of Pakistan. He made it happen through the 1971 War of Liberation in which 3 million people sacrificed their lives. Mujib was then in Pakistani custody awaiting junta's gallows as he was sentenced to death by hanging by a military tribunal in a sham trial on charge of treason. Barring a few Pakistani collaborators, Bengalis of all walks of life fought against the Pakistan occupation army in the name of their beloved leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, unfailingly following his clarion call made in his historic 7th March Address, winning victory in the War of Liberation on December 16, 1971. This was followed by Mujib's triumphant home coming on January 10, 1972. Such events were unprecedented with no parallel in history.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is intrinsically inseparable from the Bangladesh state. The year 2020 marked the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, as he was born in 1920. This was followed by the first 50th years of Bangladesh's independence in 2021. In order to commemorate the two great events, the year 2020-2021 was declared as 'Mujib Barsha' [Mujib Year] by the Bangladesh government. An array of multifaceted programmes was adopted at state, individual and institutional levels, which included, among other things, learned discussions, publication of books, commemorative volumes, etc.

One such commemorative volume published jointly by the University Press Limited (UPL) and the North South University (NSU) came to my hand. The idea of bringing out the volume was conceived by the NSU authority, as the Editor tells us, while crafted by an Editorial Board with Sharif uddin Ahmed, a former faculty of History, University of Dhaka, currently serving as Professor of History and Philosophy, NSU, as Editor. The volume drew my keen interest on four counts. First, Bangabandhu,

War of Liberation and Bangladesh State formation comprise the major areas of my academic interest and works; second, North South University is the first and foremost non-government university in Bangladesh; hence, its academic activities deserve attention from the academia; third, the Editor Sharif uddin Ahmed is widely known for his works on the Dhaka city and not known to have written anything (book, book-chapter or an article in a journal) on Bangabandhu or Bangladesh War of Liberation before the present edited volume, which roused my interest to see how did he manage it; finally, the blurb of the volume asserts, "We hope that this publication will remain a sought-after source for anyone working on Bangladesh's history, both locally and internationally."

The publication contains the names of Board of Trustees of NSU, A Timeline of Bangabandhu's Life, Acknowledgements, Editor's Note, Introduction, Prologue, Contents, Epilogue, Index, About NSU and the Founders of North South University. Mention may be made that, besides the general task of editing, the Editor himself has written the Editor's Note, Introduction, Epilogue and a write up (no. 46) in the volume in his name. The work is an anthology of 47 write ups divided into two sections— Bengali and English, being written by an array of people (politicians, journalists, academicians, photo journalist, freelancer, etc.) at different times, many of which were earlier published either in newspapers or in books. For instance, while Tofail Ahmed's write up (no. 1) and that of Professor Dr. Mijanur Rahman (no. 15), were published in *newspapers*¹, Shamsuzzaman Khan's write up (no. 12) was published in a book edited by Abdul Wahab.²

The editor should have mentioned this giving the dates and mediums of earlier publications in the cases of reproduction of the write ups in proper places of his volume. However, he refrained from doing so. 'An Anthology (or Assorted Essays) on Bangabandhu and Bangladesh' would have been a more appropriate title for the work in view of its contents in the place of one, as entitled. I wonder, how could a learned work, be it a compilation, contain the names of Board of Trustees and founding members of the said university?

Let us now turn to pages on which the learned Editor endeavored to give the readership of his view of Bangabandhu's statehood ideal including the reason for involvement in the Muslim League/Pakistan movement. To quote him, "Bangabandhu started working with the Muslim League for the betterment of the conditions of the Muslim community of India, especially in Bengal" (Epilogue, p. 423). He further writes, "His [Bangabandhu's] campaign [in the 1946 elections] resulted in their political, social and cultural freedom, being realised in the victory of the Muslim

League and its demand for Pakistan" (Epilogue, p. 423). He continues, "Soon, Bangabandhu faced a dire situation he could never have imagined. The Pakistani ruling coterie headed by Governor-General Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared that Urdu *should* be the state language of Pakistan," (p. 423)³

These set forth a number of questions to answer: Did Bangabandhu believe in the Indian Muslims constituting an integrated community or was he not all along aware of the Bengali identity while engaged himself in the Muslim League/Pakistan movement? Was the 1947 Pakistan comprising of the two wings with glaring differences in almost every respect (history, language, culture, strand of faith, etc.), again, being distanced by more than a thousand mile of India's territory, in commensurate with Bangabandhu's statehood ideal? Was there any word called 'Pakistan' in the 1940 Lahore Resolution? How to explain the move initiated by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, though unsuccessful, for United Independent Bengal as a third state outside both India and Pakistan preceding the partition, in which Bangabandhu played an active role, along with a section of Bengal Provincial Muslim League and Congress leaderships? Was it not a fact that Bangabandhu favoured the establishment of an independent state in the eastern region of India, as stipulated in the 1940 Lahore Resolution, which reflected his distinct statehood ideal?⁴ How could one, as Sharif uddin Ahmed definitely does, as mentioned above, hold the view that the 'political, social and cultural freedom' of the Bengali Muslims were also 'realised in the victory of the Muslim League and its demand for Pakistan'? If that was so, then, why did the language movement take place so early in East Bengal (first phase, March 1948) in which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a leading role, resulting in his imprisonment by the Muslim League government along with others? It is now widely known that the state of Pakistan came into being with state language controversies between the Bengalis and non-Bengalis engaged in the Pakistan movement.⁵ As a matter of fact, such a debate dated long back.⁶ Hence, how could the Editor hold the view, as already seen, that Bangabandhu 'could never have imagined' the state language policy of the Pakistan rulers including Jinnah in favour of 'only Urdu'? Any informed reader of the book would readily agree that, given his academic background (Professor of History), the Editor must not have failed to see things in proper perspective instead of holding contentious views.

In the book, fundamental mistakes abound.⁷ These pertain to dates, name of Fazlul Huq's party [Krishak Sramik Party, and not Krishak Praja Party] joining the United Front (1954), the oft-quoted declaration of Bangabandhu at the end of his 7th March

Address, the first Prime Minister [Tajuddin Ahmad, and not Sheikh Mujibur Rahman] of independent Bangladesh, the designation of the Chief of the provincial government [Chief Minister, and not Prime Minister] after 1947 partition, dates of arrest and releases of Bangabandhu, holding of Awami League's council meetings, presentation of Bangabandhu's historic 6-point programme, to cite a few (I feel impelled to write a separate review detailing out all these things). Such mistakes must not be there in an edited volume.

The Editor Sharif uddin Ahmed himself contributed a write up (no. 46, pp. 399-413) in the book under the title, 'Final Imprisonment of Bangabandhu and Triumphant Return from West Pakistan'. One may raise the following questions: Did Bangabandhu return from 'West Pakistan' or Pakistan? After the emergence of Bangladesh, was there any 'West Pakistan' state, or it instantaneously became Pakistan? The way the second part of the title phrased, this may even create the impression that Bangabandhu's return was from 'West Pakistan' to 'East Pakistan'. Will that be wrong or refutable since the writer did not spell out in the title where did Bangabandhu return to? Needless to say that the puzzle looms large as a result of naming 'West Pakistan' by the learned editor.

Let us now turn our attention to 'A Timeline of Bangabandhu's Life' on inner pages of the book (pp. xiv-xvi). This chronicled the major events in Bangabandhu's life from his birth in 1920 to his falling victim to assassins' bullets in the brutal August 1975 killing. Usually, such a snapshot-style account of a distinguished personality is very useful to a reader as well as to researcher provided the chronicle is comprehensive and factually correct. Unfortunately, it is falling far short of both considerations. For instance: Bangabandhu's starting of schooling at *Gopalganj Primary School*; getting married in the *year 1938*; coming first into contact with A. K. Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy *in 1939*; going into hunger strike *for 13 days from 14 February* during the 1952 language movement; presentation of 'Six-point mandate' [programme] *in an AL-Party Convention* in Lahore in 1966; election as party president *on 1 March* 1966; winning landside victory in the East Pakistan Provincial assembly & *Pakistan National Constituent Assembly elections on 7 December* 1970; courting *arrest on 25th March mid-night* (italics mine)— these are all incorrect statements/information. The following are the corrected versions:⁸

First, Bangabandhu's schooling started at Gimadanga-Tungipara Primary School (English medium) in Tungipara (not in Gopalganj); second, got married in 1932/33 (not in 1938) at the age of 12/13; third, first contact with Fazlul Huq and Suhrawardy in 1938 (not in 1939); fourth, went into hunger strike for 11 (eleven) days (not 13

days) in Faridpur jail from 16 February (not 14 February) during the second phase of the language movement in 1952; fifth, attempted to present Six-point programme in the Subject Committee of the all-party convention in Lahore but the Committee flatly refused to consider it for inclusion into the agenda in view of its 'extremely radical character'. So, he could not present it there. The statement made in the book is wrong. It may be further pointed out that in protest, Bangabandhu dissociated himself and his party from the convention. Upon his arrival in Tejgaon (old) Airport, Dhaka on 11 February 1966, he made the first public presentation of his Six-point demand before a group of journalists; sixth, elected President of Awami League on 19 March (not on 1 March) in the 3-day council meeting (18-20 March) held in Hotel Eden (now, non-existing) in Motijheel, Dhaka in 1966; seventh, the central assembly of former Pakistan was called National Assembly (not National Constituent Assembly) and the elections to both National and East Pakistan Provincial Assemblies were held on 7 and 17 December 1970, respectively (not on the same date i.e. 7 December); eighth, Bangabandhu was arrested by the Pakistani commandos in the early hour of 26 March (not on 25 March), while immediately before his arrest he declared Bangladesh's independence. There are other mistakes, too, in the Life Timeline of Bangabandhu in the book. Bangabandhu's courting arrest on 11 March 1948 during the first phase of the language movement is conspicuously absent from the chronology. Though the matters of the profile were compiled by another person, a hundred million question creeps in the mind of a careful reader: Can the learned Editor exonerate himself from all the fundamental factual mistakes, as mentioned above?

Finally, I would not say that the book at hand has no worth at all. There are some good reminiscences and write ups. However, how could one recommend such a book to readership when it is fraught with abundant factual mistakes and lack of conceptual clarity of serious nature? The celebration of Bangabandhu's birth centenary and the first fifty-year of Bangladesh's independence (golden jubilee) marked mushrooming of publications on Bangabandhu and Bangladesh, many by all and sundry, without caring for quality. It's a pity that, though edited by a noted historian, the book on *Bangabandhu and Bangladesh* is no exception. I wonder, how could UPL, being the internationally reputed learned publisher in Bangladesh, be associated with the publication of such a book as a co-publisher?

Harun-or-Rashid*

* Former Vice-Chancellor of National University; Bangabandhu Professorial Fellow at Heidelberg University, Germany and currently Member of the Council, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.

Notes and references

1. *Daily Amader Samoy*, 17 March 2019 and *Daily Ittefaq*, 18 March 2020, respectively.
2. Abdul Wahab (ed.), *Bangabandhur Shaat Marcher Bhason : Itihash O Totto* (in Bengali), Dhaka: Mowla Brothers 2014, pp. 308-317.
3. Italic type mine. Jinnah's declaration regarding the State language of Pakistan was: "Make no mistake about it. There can be only one State language [...] and that language [...] can only be Urdu." He made this declaration in his convocation address at Curgon Hall, University of Dhaka, on 24 March 1948. See *Dhaka University: The Convocation Speeches, vol. 2, 1948-1970*, compiled by Serajul Islam Islam Choudhury, University of Dhaka 1989, p. 24. Three days before, on 21 March, Jinnah made a similar pronouncement while addressing a public meeting in Racecourse (currently Suhrawardy Uddyan). In both places, his address dwelling on State language policy invoked instantaneous protest. For his address in Racecourse, see Oli Ahad, *Jatyo Rajniti 1945-1975* (in Bengali), Dhaka: Khosroj Kitabmohol 1997, pp. 53-62.
4. For Bangabandhu's Bengali identity, his involvement in the Muslim League/Pakistan movement, the 1940 Lahore Resolution, Bangabandhu's statehood ideal, his role in Suhrawardy's move for United Independent Bengal, his leadership role in the 1948 and 1952 language movement, etc., see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *Ausamapta Atmajiboni* [The Unfinished Memoirs], (Dhaka: UPL 2012); Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh : Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906-1947*, (Dhaka: UPL 2003, 2012, 2015, 2021); Harun-or-Rashid, *From 1947 Partition : Bangabandhu and State Formation in perspective*, (Dhaka: UPL 2021); Harun-or-Rashid, *Bangio Muslim League : Pakistan Andolon, Bangalir Rastrobhabna o Bangabandhu* (in Bengali), (Dhaka: Anyaprokash 2018); Harun-or-Rashid, *Bhasa Andolone Bangabandhur Bhumika* (in Bengali), (Dhaka: Anyaprokash 2020); Syed Shahryar Iqbal (ed.), *Sheikh Mujib in Parliament (1955-1958)*, (Dhaka: Agamee Prokashani 2016).
5. For language controversies between Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims in the Muslim League and Pakistan movement, see Harun-or-Rashid, *Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*; Harun-or-Rashid, *Bangio Muslim League: Pakistan Andolon*; Harun-or-Rashid, *Bhasa Andolone Bangabandhur Bhumika*.
6. See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengla Muslims, 1871-1906 : A Quest for Identity*, (Dhaka: Oxford University Press 1998).
7. Sharif uddin Ahmed (ed.), *Bangabandhu and Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: UPL and North South University 2021), pp. 15, 17, 34, 60, 132-133, 275-278, xv.
8. For corrected versions of various dates, names of institution and assembly, events, occurrences, etc. provided by the reviewer against this note, see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *Ausamapta Atmajiboni*; Harun-or-Rashid, *Bangabandhukosh : Jatirpita Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahmaner Shachitra Jibon-brittanta* [Encyclopaedia of Bangabandhu: Life-Sketch of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with Pictorial illustration], (Dhaka: Journeyman Books 2021); Harun-or-Rashid, *Bhasa Andolone Bangabandhur Bhumika*; Harun-or-Rashid, *'Amader Bachar Dabee' Chhoi-Dafar Panchash Bachhor* [Our Charter of Survival : Fifty years of Six-point], (Dhaka: Bangla Academy 2016); Harun-or-Rashid, *Bangabandhur Ausamapta Atmajiboni Punorpat*, [Bangabandhu's Unfinished Memoirs Re-visited], (Dhaka: UPL 2020, 6th print); Harun-or-Rashid, *Muldharar Rajniti : Bangladesh Awami League Council 1949-2016* [Mainstream Politics : Bangladesh Awami League Council 1949-2016], (Dhaka: Bangla Academy 2016).