

7TH MARCH SPEECH OF BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN

In the history of Bangladesh, March 07, 1971, has a very significant role. The speech given by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Race Course Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan) on that day to an audience of a million people shaped our destiny.

It gave an important message to our people that we would have to fight our final battle for independence. The Pakistani military junta was not going to hand over power to us in a democratic manner. They already cancelled the first session of the newly elected assembly to be held on March 3. A Bengali prime minister of Pakistan? The Pakistani rulers weren't going to allow it.

So, Bangabandhu gave his signal to the people he loved to a fault – "Ebarer sangram amader muktir sangram!" It was our battle for emancipation this time. On October 30, 2017, Unesco added the speech to the Memory of the World Register as a documentary heritage.

Much has been said and a lot has been written about Bangabandhu's March 7 speech. Many have called the 18-minute speech our best poem, the poem of our independence. It is as important as, if not greater than, the Gettysburg Address of Abraham Lincoln. The impromptu speech carried the hopes, aspirations and dreams of seventy-five million suffering people. It heralded our great war of liberation. We would cease to be a colony and live respectably as free citizens of a free country.

On March 1, 1971, the cricket match against the visiting MCC came to an abrupt end at the Dhaka Stadium. News of the cancellation of the proposed first session of the Constituent Assembly had reached us. Yahya Khan's announcement shocked the Bengali nation. The students and the young people were seething in anger. There was an outcry across the country. I was just a tenth grader and it was twenty days after my sixteenth birthday. I loved cricket but I loved my country much more. I ran out into the streets from the students' eastern gallery with hundreds of young men and found big processions crossing the city roads. Students of Dhaka University, colleges and schools, labourers from the Adamjee Jute Mills and the common people were chanting sky-piercing slogans: "Tomar Amar thikana /Padma, Meghna, Jamuna". There was a hurriedly called crowded press conference by the Awami League at Hotel Purbani in the afternoon. Journalists and the general public rushed there to listen to Bangabandhu. He urged them to be patient and talked about his and his party's next moves.

We, the young and the old, noticed with great satisfaction that Bangabandhu was the de facto ruler of Bangladesh. Seventy-five million people listened only to him. He announced a peaceful civil disobedience movement in Bangladesh (East Pakistan). Directives were issued to the government and non-government offices. And he was going to address his people on March 7 at the Race Course Maidan. There were killings of unarmed protesters at various places by security forces and our people wanted nothing but total freedom from the Pakistani rule.

The whole nation waited eagerly and anxiously for his speech. What was the great orator going to say? Declare independence unilaterally and cut off all connections with the military government of Pakistan? Or agree to have talks with Yahya Khan, who was coming to meet him soon? The Pakistanis were in fear and terrible anxiety too. They knew that they were not at all wanted in East Pakistan.

On March 7, 1971, all roads lead to Rome – yes, the Race Course! Students and teachers of Dhaka University, all political activists of various parties who wanted independence, farmers from villages and labourers from the industrial areas – Ten lakh people gathered to listen to the undisputed leader of the country. It was the province's biggest-ever public meeting. There was pin-drop silence when he climbed the stairs to the dais. He was the only speaker that day! The voice of thunder outlined the country's future in a brilliant impromptu speech. He gave language to the aspirations and dreams of his people.

Bangabandhu began on a sad note. We were to get power, our people wanted independence but we were getting killed in the streets. What wrong did we do? He wanted immediate lifting of martial law and immediate transfer of power to the people's representatives as conditions for joining the National Assembly. He also gave directives for a civil disobedience movement. The speech lasted about 18 minutes and concluded with, "The struggle this time, is a struggle for our liberty. The struggle this time, is a struggle for our independence. Joy Bangla!" It was a de facto declaration of Bangladesh's independence.

A direct declaration of independence was not made, perhaps keeping Biafra and Rhodesia in mind. Nevertheless, the speech was effective in giving our people a clear goal of independence. The Pakistani government didn't allow the live broadcast of the speech. But on the next day, under tremendous pressure from the Bengali employees of the Radio and TV, it had to be put on air. Audio and video recordings were sent abroad by foreign journalists.

Thus, history was created on March 7, 1971. The liberation war of Bangladesh was to begin eighteen days later, when Yahya Khan treacherously stopped talking to Bangabandhu and the army carried out Operation Searchlight, massacring students, teachers and innocent civilians! 'Pakistan lay buried under corpses', said Tajuddin Ahmad, the wartime Prime Minister, a few days later at Mujibnagar.