

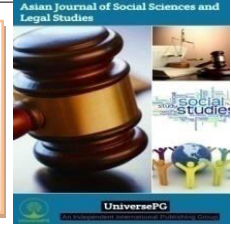


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Historic 7th March Speech of Bangabandhu: Democracy and Civility in Leadership

Jubaida Sultana¹ and Md. Al Amin^{2*}

^{1&2}History & Civilization Discipline, Khulna University, Khulna, Bangladesh

*Correspondence: alamnbn8@gmail.com (Md. Al Amin, Lecturer, History & Civilization Discipline, Khulna University, Bangladesh)

ABSTRACT

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the name that the Bengali nation remembers and cheers, who inspired millions with his leadership. His speech of 7th March, 1971 electrified the nation and set the tone for the great war of liberation. His speech has manifested the belief in freedom and equality between people and his enthusiastic courtesy and warmth in guiding the people to their destined future. Democracy is a situation, system or organization in which everyone has equal rights and opportunities. It is the belief that everyone in the country has the right to express their opinion and can help in making decisions. And civility is defined as civilized conduct or the quality of being polite. The objective of this research is to highlight the fact that how the Father of the Bengali Nation, Bangabandhu had shown civility and put importance on democracy in his 7th March speech. These two most important things, emphasized in his speech are the reasons behind Bangabandhu being loved and adored by the people. His genuine devotion and affection for his people was clearly cognized through his speech of 7th March. This qualitative research includes data collected from historical sources. Newspaper, government files (archival sources) and interviews are the primary sources used in this research. And books and articles published in different journals are used as the secondary sources.

Keywords: Bangabandhu, March, Democracy, Civility, Leadership, Freedom, Emancipation, and Struggle.

INTRODUCTION

Words are powerful things when they are put in the hands of skillful orators. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman knew exactly how to use words to inspire and invigorate a nation long under oppression to snatch freedom. The Bengal Tiger was given its roar because of Bangabandhu's stirring oration, which is perhaps his greatest legacy. His speeches during the troubled times of the late 60s and early 70s had turned the whole country upside down. And at the helm of Bangabandhu's great speeches sits the one he delivered in a crowded Race Course Maidan on March

7, 1971. To build a firm structure of democracy in Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib delivered this very speech showing no sign of rudeness or disrespect towards his people, nor to his enemies.

"The struggle this time is for emancipation! The struggle this time is for independence!" these words sent shiver down the spine of the Bengali nation and prepared them for a disciplined war against the oppressors. The robust and hearty voice of his appealed yet inflamed the nation to fight for freedom, for democracy.

Leadership

A simple definition is that leadership is the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal. According to the Webster New Encyclopedic Dictionary, the capacity to lead or the act or an instance of leading is called leadership. While there are people who are endowed with more natural leadership abilities than others, by improving particular skills one can learn to become a leader. History is full of people who persuaded others to follow their suggested course of action having no previous leadership experience. They had stepped forward in crisis situations. They possessed traits and qualities that helped them to step into roles of leadership.

Sheikh Mujib is a classic example of someone who learned to develop the skills of leadership he possessed. By all accounts, Sheikh Mujib was a mercurial genius who rose to the ranks of the Awami League and East Pakistani politics as a charismatic and forceful orator.

Bangabandhu, Father of the Nation

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman created the subcontinent's first nation state based on linguistic nationalism and first secular state. The chief

coordinator of the National Implementation Committee for the Celebration of the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Poet Kamal Choudhury invoked a familiar remark from Fidel Castro: "I have not seen the Himalayas, but I have seen Sheikh Mujib." Bangabandhu was born on 17 March 1920 in the village Tungipara under the Gopalganj Sub-division.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a founding member of the East Pakistan Muslim Students League (est. 1948), one of the founding joint secretaries of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League (est. 1949), general secretary of the Awami league (1953-1966), president of the Awami League (1966-1974), president of Bangladesh (in absentia from 26 March 1971 to 11 January 1972), prime minister of Bangladesh (1972-24 January 1975), president of Bangladesh (25 January 1975-15 August 1975). Kamal Choudhury added: "When we are talking about Bangabandhu, we get very emotional. He was titled the 'Poet of Politics' not by Bangalis, but by Newsweek". He also said, "Bangabandhu is our George Washington by vision and Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi by association. He is the greatest Bangali of our time".

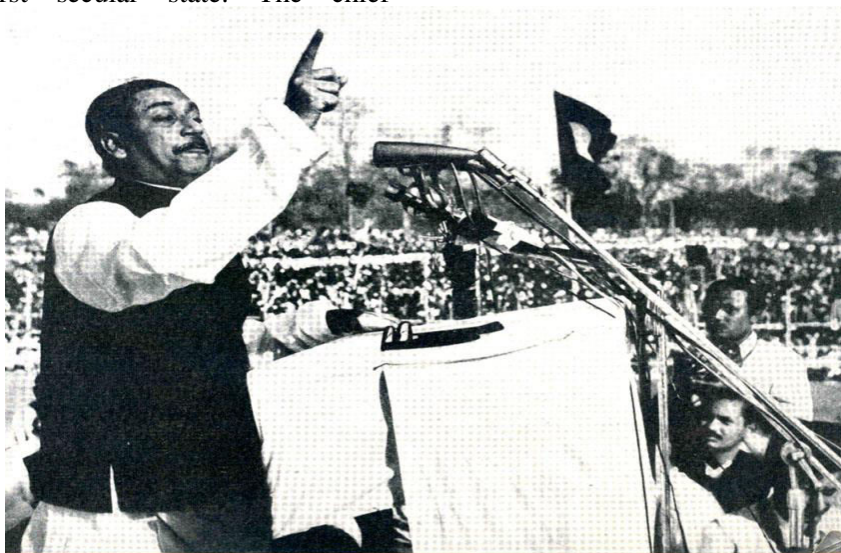


Fig 1: Bangabandhu at the Racecourse, on March 7th, 1971.

There is no denial that he is the greatest Bengali of all time. Whether it's his speech for the nation or a general conversation with a person, his politeness and soothing voice had been astonishing people around the UniversePG | www.universepg.com

whole world. His polite and civilized manner of calling people inspired them in brotherhood and fight for their own motherland.

Democracy

It is difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of democracy. However, the widely accepted matter is that the main idea of democracy is originated from Athens in the 5th century BC.ⁱ Unlike dictatorships, oligarchies, monarchies and aristocracies, in which the people have little or no say in who is elected and how the government is run, democracy means ‘rule by the people’, as input from those representing citizens determines the direction of the country. The basic definition of democracy in its purest form comes from the Greek language which says that it is the most challenging form of government.

According to Lindell, and Scott (1999), the term originates from the Greek word “demokratia” ‘rule of the people’ which was coined from “demos” which means ‘people’ and “kratos” which means ‘power’ or ‘rule’ in the 5th century B.C.ⁱⁱ The Webster New Encyclopedic Dictionary (1995) defines democracy as a government in which people are invested upon with supreme power and they directly or indirectly exercise them through representation.

American political scientist Larry Diamond (2004) gave an overview of what in his opinion is democracy. He describes democracy as a system of government with four key elements in a lecture titled “What is Democracy?” as follows:

- i) A system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.
- ii) Active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life.
- iii) Protection of the human rights of all citizens, and
- iv) A rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

The main forms of democracy are: Direct democracy, Representative democracy, Presidential democracy, Parliamentary democracy, Authoritarian democracy, Participatory democracy, Islamic democracy and Social democracy.

The greatest Bengali of all time, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the Prime Minister of Bangladesh under a parliamentary system adopted by the new country. Proclaiming the four fundamental principles of “Nationalism, Secularism, Democracy and Socialism”, he charged the provisional parliament to write a new constitution. These four principles reflect his political views collectively known as ‘Mujibism’.

Democracy in Bangladesh

Democracy has a long history that has evolved with the progress of human civilization. After signing the Magna Charta, England adopted a parliamentary system which became the symbol of democracy, and the system was spread elsewhere.

But democracy did not remain limited to a parliamentary system; rather with the passing of time, democracy did not have just a single form. With a strong bicameral legislature, a new presidential system evolved in the USA. The newly independent countries of Asia and Africa also adopted parliamentary democracy. But their under-developed social and economic reality could not sustain democracy. In the place of foreign rulers, native dictators took power and modeled the pattern of democracy and thus they were favored to rule permanently. Some of them introduced a presidential form of government. Sometimes democracy was renamed to make it suitable for totalitarianism.

In Pakistan, abolishing parliamentary democracy, General Ayub Khan introduced a system called ‘Basic Democracy’. According to late Justice Kayani of Pakistan, Ayub’s system was neither anything basic nor democratic. Under this system the parliament has no power and the president is the supreme authority.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bangladesh was the first colony of the British Raj. With modern English education, a strong middle-class of both Hindus and Muslims had emerged in the region among Bengalis. The practice of Westminster-style of Democracy was what the Bengalis had learned from their rulers.

After the independence of the subcontinent from British rule, both India and Pakistan introduced

parliamentary systems in their respective nations. Although democracy was much deep-rooted in Indian politics, Pakistan couldn't hold on to the system fairly. Especially in the then West Pakistan, feudal lords were the real rulers of Pakistan who prioritized religion over democracy. So there were conflicts between them and the middle-class Bengalis of former East Pakistan. Being liberal and less communal, the latter's language and culture was different from the former. The consequence was separation between the two wings of Pakistan- Bangladesh, a secular state with parliamentary democracy and Pakistan, an almost Sharia state under a military rule.

Social division and the old communal legacy of politics did not let the parliamentary democracy survive in Bangladesh for long. Long ago, a British judge, Justice Ellis, the chief justice of the former East Pakistan High Court, made a controversial remark: "If you bring the seeds of democracy from the bank of Thames and sow them in the bank of Meghan, the plant may not grow because of the difference of climates and social atmosphere of the two places".^{iv}

The founder of the new nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, did not agree with this comment fully, but realized that true Westminster-style of Democracy was not introduced in the subcontinent by British Raj. He believed that the British Raj introduced a system which may be termed as 'colonial democracy', where bureaucracy had its hands on power.

Democracy in Bangabandhu's Leadership:

Sheikh Mujib led the Bengali nationalist movement always staying within the bounds of democratic politics.. The movement became stronger day by day from 1947 till 1970.

If we focus on the 7th March speech of Bangabandhu, his thoughts on the democracy was crystal clear. All the four key elements of democracy is found in the speech, as Larry Diamond had overviewed. The analysis is as such:

A system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections: "You are the ones who brought about an Awami League

victory so you could see a constitutional government restored", Bangabandhu had remarked this line in his speech on the day of 7th March.^v This very line reflects his belief in democracy. He wanted his people to choose their representative in the assembly.

"The hope was that the elected representatives of the people, sitting in the National Assembly, would formulate a constitution that would assure that people of their economic, political and cultural emancipation",^{vi} he added emphasizing on the choice of the people.

A rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens: "After the downfall of Ayub, Mr. Yahya Khan took over with the promise that he would restore constitutional rule, that he would restore democracy and return power to the people",^{vii} Bangabandhu said as he had hoped for the Bengali peoples' fate to be changed, how the people had hoped for. But the Pakistani government never seemed to keep their words.

"I now declare the closure of all the courts, offices, and educational institutions for an indefinite period of time. No one will report to their offices- that is my instruction to you",^{viii} saying so he again added, "So that the poor are not inconvenienced, rickshaws, trains and other transport will ply normally-except serving any needs of the armed forces. If the army does not respect this, I shall not be responsible for the consequences".^{ix} He had highlighted the fact of discrimination between the two wings of Pakistan. He wanted to restore that difference.

He said' "If we can peaceably settle our differences there is still hope that we can co-exist as brothers. Otherwise there is no hope".^x He wanted the balance between the people of the two Pakistans. He emphasized on keeping up the brotherhood with the West Pakistanis even after all the discrimination.

"I committed myself to the support of anything to bolster the restoration of a constitutional government",^{xi} that's how he expressed how important equality was for him.

Great speeches have a habit of being made at times of strife. Bangabandhu's March 7 speech is no different. It was delivered at a time when the eyes of the world were on East Pakistan's continuing struggle against the oppression of West Pakistan, struggle for democracy. The fiery yet measured speech inspired the Bengalis to prepare for a war of independence amid widespread reports of armed mobilization by West Pakistan.

Civility

Preoccupation with civil discourse can be traced to the writings of Aristotle, who coined the term 'civil society' to reflect a form of political association referred to as 'state' or 'polis' (Schmidt, 1998). Closely related to citizenship and civilization, civility is also derivative of the Latin *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (city), which are themselves the Latin equivalents of the Greek family of words stemming from *polis* (city) (Kesler, 1992).

A civility model grounded in empirical data, developed by Adolf G. Gundersen and Suzanne Goodney Lea, stresses the notion that 'civility is a sequence, not a single thing or set of things'. Increasingly demanding traits ranging from 'indifference' to 'commentary', 'conversation', and 'co-exploration' and from there to 'habituation' are said to be consisted in the scale of civility. Such a developmental model that conceives of civility as a scale has several distinct advantages. According to the authors, it allows civility to be viewed as something everyone can get better at.^{xii}

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is one of the remarkable examples of such a unique characteristic, showing civility towards his people and being passionate to fight against injustice at the same time. The considerable confusion among those who assume that civility is synonymous with lack of conviction and passion, can be removed if they acknowledge how Bangabandhu had been a vigorous and forceful advocate for liberty and justice without being uncivil. Like Martin Luther King Jr. Sheikh Mujib's polite and dauntless characteristic beholds the fact clearly that to

be a civilized individual does not mean to be devoid of principles and unwilling to fight for great causes.

Civility as a Democratic Virtue

Democracy is a way of life. To reconsider how manners and the political realm of free thought may be related can be a pragmatist approach to democracy. Civility is not a set of rules; rather it can be described as an activity.

Civility is an important virtue that is poorly underestimated by some who share the outlook of Craig Shirley, who is a Public Affairs Consultant and an author. As Stephen Carter has written, "Civility is a precondition of democratic dialogue".^{xiii}

Civility in Bangabandhu's Leadership:

"My Dear Brothers..."^{xiv} the Father of the Nation had remarked at the beginning of his speech on the day of March 7th. The way he urged his people, the way he was affectionate towards them, beholds the fact of his politeness at any situation. It's a virtue that has to be in within one's natural instinct. Sheikh Mujib was such a gem, who had shown this instinct in every sentence of his speech.

He called out to his people to fight for the country, to be ready to sacrifice. But he never forced anyone to do so. He asked the people to willingly participate in the fight with a dauntless but polite voice. That's how we know him, the Father of the Nation, who never showed any clue of incivility in his speech.

This pragmatic leader developed his skills in leadership, not being devoid of his natural instinct of the benevolent person he always was. He called for a hartal and the non cooperative movement. In his speech on March 7th, he again instructed the people to keep up the movement in a mannerly way. He told them to put out the strike and the movement in a civilized manner and people acted accordingly.

In his speech, Bangabandhu articulated several directives to the nation as part of the civil disobedience movement. The former chairman of the Board of Governance of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS),

Ambassador Munshi Fayez Ahmed said, “He (Bangabandhu) used a set of emotional appeals to establish his point which convinced people to agree with his argument about freedom”.^{xv}

Prof. Syed Anwar Hossain, supernumerary professor at the history department in Dhaka University, said that the historic March 7 speech was one of Bangabandhu’s shortest public speeches ever yet the speech primarily speaks of human rights. Comprising 1,108 words, the speech only lasted for 18:31 minutes. However those words were not only spoken for the Bengali people of East Pakistan, but also for the whole of humanity. “Those words were a culmination of his political excellence with which he had left a legacy for aspiring human rights fighters,” said Prof. Syed Anwar Hossain.^{xvi}

The fact that the people had listened to him and obeyed all his instructions was all because of his benevolence and polite behavior towards any of his subjects. He never failed to show the due respect to the then government of Pakistan.

“I had said, Mr. Yahya Khan, you are the President of this country”, Bangabandhu had said this line with the proper respect a President deserves, not caring about how rude the person was towards the others. He never treated anyone from the enemy side disrespectfully.

He had a tender heart. He was such a simple man that seeing him being all polite and friendly towards the common people no one could tell he was the leader of such a big nation. He interacted with millions of people on the day of March 7th, not a single sign of being kingly could be pointed out.

In every line of his speech, he expressed brotherhood with his people. He wanted the concept of brotherhood to be spread around the whole of Pakistan. “I say to them again, you are my brothers, return now to the barracks where you belong and no one will bear any hostility toward you”, that’s the way he addressed the enemies, calling them brothers.

He was benevolent while interacting as well as strict while leading the people for political purpose. In his speech he had emphasized on the unity of the nation’s

people with a thunderous voice. But again people could feel the warmth of affection he hid behind his speech.

Bangabandhu, a role model of all the virtues multiplied, won millions of hearts by delivering kind and polite remarks to people regardless of class, age, gender and cast. Even after becoming the Prime Minister of a whole big country like Bangladesh, he remained the way he used to be, being courteous and simple and addressing his people informally like one would do with his/her friend.

While the firm structure of democracy is drawn by diplomacy, many think that democracy and civility are contrary to each other. The question may arise if any leader can be civil while exercising democracy.

A very common question is if Bangabandhu could maintain his civil conduct while protecting his people and negotiating with the West Pakistani government. Whether he was the patient and polite king, we have known him to be. Again, democracy is the way the government uses to rule over the people in a diplomatic process.

Civility is one of the ways in which citizenship is experienced. It means a way of trying to define from within the very situation on what should be or can be done. Democracy and civility are mostly considered to be two different dimensions in real life although there are often some opinions that harmonize them.

The harmony between these two dimensions is seen in the March 7th speech of Bangabandhu, which is the aim of this research paper. From the beginning of the speech till the end, the 18:31 minutes long speech is filled with Bangabandhu’s vigorous yet polite and kind words. Where democracy and civility is said to be on different tracks, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman set the example of civility being a democratic virtue through his best speech ever in 1971.

CONCLUSION

Bangabandhu was failed by his own people in his second revolution for the emancipation of the people. The bureaucracy, the new-rich class, the communal

forces, and the civil society all stood together against the newly proposed system. Consequently, the new system was nipped in the bud when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed. A military dictatorship captured power and the democratic base of Bangladesh was weakened. Bangladesh was plunged into corruption and anarchy. The rule of the law was all but ignored. Communalism grew further and eventually took the form of violent fundamentalism, in the name of returning to democracy. A fight went on for two decades in Bangladesh between military rulers and the political parties which believed in democracy. Democratic institutions in Bangladesh were weakened and almost dilapidated under military and autocratic rule. At last, democracy returned sometimes under the Presidential system and sometimes under the Parliamentary system, which structurally remained too weak. Fragile democracy is now in a constant struggle with socially divisive forces including extremism and Bangabandhu's worthy heir, Sheikh Hasina is doing her best in endorsing democracy fully in Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in June, 2018, said Bangladesh's democracy is now well-protected and it has earned the capability to face any disaster. "Our economy has stood on a solid ground and democracy is well-protected... we've been able to ensure fundamental rights of the people like food, clothes, housing and education," she remarked.^{xvii}. Under the title 'The Struggle This Time Is the Struggle for Independence', Bangabandhu's speech has been

placed on page 201 of the book "We Shall Fight on the Beaches: The Speeches That Inspired History" by Jacob F Field. The book is a collection of "extracts from the most rousing and inspirational wartime speeches of the last 2,500 years—Cicero to Churchill, Lincoln to Mao", where Bangabandhu's speech was included as one of the most inspirational speeches ever in the year of 2014. In May 2019, the speech has been translated in Japanese by the Bangladesh embassy in Japan as the first foreign language after English. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina says the youth have many things to learn from the historic 7th March Speech of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to groom them imbued with patriotism, dutifulness and sincerity, UNB reports.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests with respect to the research.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ<https://www.livescience.com/20919-democracy.html>

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^{iv} *ibid.*

^v<http://allbd.org/articles/news/31534/Historical-7th-March-Speech-of-Bangabandhu>

^{vi} *ibid.*

^{vii} *ibid.*

^{viii} *ibid.*

^{ix} *ibid.*

^x *ibid.*

^{xi} *ibid.*

^{xii} Gundersen, Adolf G., PhD, and Suzanne Goodney Lea, PhD (March 14, 2013). “*Let's Talk Politics: Restoring Civility through Exploratory Discussion*”. [Publisher=Interactivity Foundation, Parkersburg, WV].

^{xiii} <https://eppc.org/publications/why-civility-is-democratic-virtue/>

^{xiv} <http://allbd.org/articles/news/31534/Historical-7th-March-Speech-of-Bangabandhu>

^{xv} <http://m.theindependentbd.com/post/240024>

^{xvi} *ibid.*

^{xvii} <http://thedailystar.net/politics/democracy-bangladesh>

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