

THE LEGACY OF BANGABANDHU'S SECULAR POLITICAL IDEALS

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ABSTRACT

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as Bangabandhu, is indisputably the founding father of the Bengali nation. A great statesman, he was at heart secular. Throughout his political life he relentlessly fought against orthodoxy and religious discrimination. This paper investigates how Bangabandhu established himself as a champion of secularism in the Pakistan state which professed Islamic ideals as its basic principle. It also examines how his secular standing shaped the course of history and politics of Bangladesh before and after the independence.

Keywords: *Bangabandhu, secular, ideals, course, Bangladesh, politics*

Introduction

To say that Bangabandhu held secular political views is to state the obvious, given the wide currency the word 'secular' has gained in recent times. But placed in the context of the time of his political grooming, that is the period spanning around the 50's, when religion informed nearly every aspect of life in the subcontinent, distancing oneself from religious calling could be generally perceived as heresy. Against such a background, if one examined Bangabandhu's growth into a politician one would become increasingly aware that Bangabandhu had a marked aversion towards religious segregation. As such he steered clear of anything that had a distinct religious bias and set the course of politics on a new path free from religious narrowness.

Bangabandhu's uncompromising secular standing

But one would be mistaken to think that Bangabandhu espoused total absence of religion. Rather, he had a different angle of view that defined his perception of secularism. He was avowedly against giving any preferential treatment to a particular religion and promoting religion at national level. But regarding practicing religion in private life Bangabandhu had no reservation as such. This stand was an indicator of a clear departure from conventional politics which was mainly divided on religious lines. Neither the leftists nor the right wingers saw eye to eye with his stance. The reason for the grudge of the right wingers was transparent as Bangabandhu slowly but gradually drifted towards secularism. But the leftists led by comrade Moni Singh, Professor Muzaffar Ahmed etc. viewed Bangabandhu's secularism as 'islamization' in disguise.

Nothing could be farther from this view. The fabric on which Bangabandhu's political philosophy was erected was essentially secular. Though Bangabandhu had his political orientation as an activist of the Muslim League - he belonged to the progressive section of the party led by Abul Hashim- about the creation of the Pakistan state he was motivated by a conviction that was far from the religious: 'The demand for Pakistan is not marked by any reaction against the Hindus. Rather it aims at cementing unity between the Hindus and the Muslims, so that the two brothers can live peacefully' (Menon) [9]. The same spirit was exhibited by Bangabandhu during the great Calcutta killing in 1946 when he did his best to save as many lives as he could on both sides of the Hindu-Muslim divide (Menon) [9]. In his *The Unfinished Memoirs* Bangabandhu has given a piece of his mind about the riot: "We managed to save some of the Hindu families living around Baker Hostel ... that people could treat each other in this way was too frightening a thought" (Rahman, p.69) [11]. When a similar mindless tragedy was repeated in 1964 involving the Hindus and Muslims in a riot, Bangabandhu put up a formidable resistance against it as the convener of the anti-riot

committee. At any rate, even his enemies could not point a finger at Bangabandhu about his nursing any communal sentiment.

With time Bangabandhu's secular views became more pronounced. He correctly realized that the Bengalis needed to return to their secular traditions. Even in the face of opposition from his own party men like Khondoker Moshtak, Bangabandhu decided uncompromisingly to do away with the word 'Muslim' from his party's name Awami Muslim League (Dastagir, p. 94) [4]. It had struck him that the word was distinctly divisive and he decided to deliver the message that the days of communal politics had been over. The step was clearly radical but Bangabandhu handled the issue ably.

The Bengalees' love for their language is a clear proof of their secular mindset. "Language is essentially secular. The language movement was essentially a secular campaign as it represented a rejection of nationalism based on religion" (Islam, p.1727) [6]. Bangabandhu had the farsightedness to suspect that a minefield was being laid out by purpose by Jinnah's singling out Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan. Another sinister design laid out by Fazl-e-Karim, the provincial Education Secretary, was his pleading for the adoption of Arabic script of Bangla under the pretext that unity of script would help preserve the facade of linguistic unity (Husain, p.183) [5]. Moreover the Pakistanis tried to spread the idea that Urdu was a sacred language as it was written in Arabic script (Ali, p.31) [2]. As a student of Dhaka University, Bangabandhu saw through the trick. He rose to the occasion and rejected both proposals out of hand. He mobilized public opinion against forcing Urdu on the Bengalis which culminated in the language movement. Had Urdu been allowed to monopolize, it would, in all probability, have replaced both Bangla and English at all levels of education, administration, judiciary, Parliament and the media. Thus wide circulation of Urdu and the concomitant suppression of Bangla would have imposed on Bangla a kind of quarantine reducing it to a local dialect fit to be used only by the lower class Bengalis in their domestic sphere.

Controversy over Tagore was a deliberate interference with Bengali culture. Tagore had become in the eyes of East Pakistan's educated youth the exclusive symbol of Bengali culture. His writings, including songs, did appeal equally to all Bengalis alike irrespective of their religion. The Pakistan government wished to cut them off from this magnificent literary inheritance because of its hatred for the Hindus. Ayub Khan's minister for information Khwaja Nazimuddin, would 'decree a ban on Tagore's songs as a measure of protecting Pakistan's Muslim Bengalis from what it considered the contaminating influence of Hindu culture as represented by the poet.' (Ahsan, p. 66) [1]. By banning Tagore song, the government, in effect, fanned the Bengalees' passion for it. Bangabandhu's reverence for Tagore was unwavering. A firebrand leader, bangabandhu made loud protests: "We refuse to obey the order of this government. We will continue to read Tagore and listen to his songs, no matter what it comes to" (Dastagir, p. 53) [4]. Bangabandhu asserted that as Bengalees we read Mirja Galib, Socrates, Shakespeare, Aristotle, Dante, Lenin, Mao Zedong etc. to draw inspiration from their writings (Dastagir, p. 53) [4]. Rabindranath is a Bengali poet and he earned his reputation by writing poetry in Bangla. Therefore, to give up Tagore was to disown Bengali culture. Bangabandhu was always wary of any move by the Pakistanis that would muzzle Bengali culture. By voicing an emphatic no to the Pakistan government's stiff-necked decision, Bangabandhu poignantly got the message across that bond of culture was way more valuable to him than the bond of religion.

Bangabandhu evinced his adulation for the great poet once again by selecting Tagore's lyric 'Amar sonar Bangla' to be sung as the national anthem of Bangladesh (Khan, p.53) [7]. To be more accurate, he had envisioned an independent Bangla much before independence loomed as a possibility, in preparation for which he set the trend of singing or playing the song to open party meetings and functions and adopted the slogan 'joy Bangla' (Dastagir, p. 32) [4]. Why, then, had this song an abiding appeal for him? An inquiry into this question would probably reveal the canvas of Bangabandhu's mind filled with the images of a land that has, with the love of a doting mother, nurtured all its living beings since time immemorial. This song appears to fit into Bangabandhu's notion of a nation roofed by the same sky, fed by the same corn, watered by the same rivers, warmed and cooled by the same climate, and not affected by artificially created division and discrimination of any kind. The song has manifestly a unifying tone about it, lending itself to bridging the gulf with an undercurrent of ill-feeling that had separated the Hindus and Muslims for decades.

Pahela Baishak is indisputably the most secular event in the life of the Bangalees. But those allied with religious politics undermine it which, they believe, promotes a culture that is far from the Islamic. Deeply imbued with the spirit of Bangalee culture, Bangabandhu did his best to glorify it and establish it as an indispensable part of Bangalee life. In 1975, marking the Bengali New Year, Bangabandhu sent greetings cards designed by Shilpacharya

Joynul Abedin to world leaders. They returned the greetings by wishing the people of Bangladesh a happy and prosperous life. (Khan, p.58) [7]

The word ‘Bangla’ was an antithesis of ‘Pak’ to those who dreamt of freeing Bengal from the yoke of Pakistan. ‘Bangladesh’ as a name of this soil was first coined by Bangabandhu even when we had been still part of East Pakistan. On 5 December 1969, in a discussion meeting to observe the death anniversary of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy Bangabandhu announced that henceforth East Pakistan would be called Bangladesh. He added, “There was a time when efforts were made to wipe out the word ‘Bangla’ from our land and map. I, on behalf of the people, proclaim today that the eastern province of Pakistan will be called ‘Bangladesh’ instead of East Pakistan” (Rahman, p. XXII) [11]. In the light of the events that had preceded this announcement that is the mass uprising of 69, this statement sent a clear signal that East Pakistan was heading for a breakaway.

By late-sixties West Pakistan established a monopolistic control over the civil and the military administration of East Pakistan. Defense budget began to swell. Force was being used to suppress opposing voices and grievances. East Pakistan increasingly felt herself to be utterly helpless menaced by a boa constrictor whose jaws were gradually but inexorably closing in on her. She belatedly realized what a Himalayan political error she had committed by hooking up with West Pakistan on the basis of a religious label called ‘two-nation theory’. Bangabandhu’s disillusion with Pakistan, which the ruling clique in the western province claimed to be an Islamic state, had already been complete. The hope of a peaceful co-existence having faded away, on 7 March 1971 Bangabandhu addressed a mammoth public rally at the Race Course ground, where he declared: ‘The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation. The struggle this time is a struggle for independence’ (Constitution, p.177) [13]. At such a critical moment Bangabandhu again was not oblivious of the safety of the ordinary people regardless of their religious or national identity: ‘Bear in mind that the enemy has infiltrated our ranks to cause confusion and sow discord among us. In our Bengal, everyone, be he Hindu or Muslim, Bangalee or non-Bangalee, is our brother. It is our responsibility to ensure their security’ he added (Constitution, p.177) [13].

Since the creation of the Pakistan state until our struggle for independence Bangabandhu has never strayed from his secular standing. The Hindu-Muslim riot left deep scars on his mind. Besides, the unspeakable atrocities committed during our liberation war in the name of religion hardened his resolve against religion being used as an ideal disguise for collective or personal gain. Syed Sajjad Husain, a pro-Pakistani intellectual, in his book *The Wastes of Time* exposed some East Pakistani Muslim League politicians who owed their political rise to exploitation of religion (Husain, p. 61) [5]. He knew a great many sordid details about the personal lives of these politicians prominent in the public eyes. If we take even fifty percent of his words at their face value, it would appear that they seldom understood or cared about principles and their profession of religious ideals was nothing but an exercise in hypocrisy.

Such abuse of religion for political gain outraged Bangabandhu which had a direct bearing on Bangabandhu’s framing a constitution which would be the first secular constitution in the subcontinent. Secularism as one of the four fundamental principles had been inducted into the constitution of Bangladesh in 1972. In the preamble of the constitution it was stated that “the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism ... shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution” (Constitution Part II, section 2) [13]. Regarding secularism Section 12 of the constitution states: The principle of secularism shall be realized by the elimination of (a) communalism in all forms; (b) the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion (Constitution, Part II, section 12) [13]. While passing the constitution in the Parliament Bangabandhu made it plain: ‘We will not by any means allow this sacred religion to be used as a political weapon’ (Menon, The Daily Prothom Alo) [9].

Quite predictably, this move provoked a noisy reaction. To the right-wing elements the term ‘secularism’ was a bugbear. They openly flung charges that incorporation of secularism was the first step towards reintegration with India as secularism is enshrined in India’s constitution. Paradoxically, a faction within Awami League itself opposed it vehemently. But Bangabandhu steeled himself against all pressure.

After independence, in his numerous public speeches Bangabandhu reiterated his commitment to the secular principles of our constitution. Generally, people tend to mistake secularism for godlessness as if religion and secularism were contradictory. But to Bangabandhu, secularism meant tolerance, harmony and coexistence of

religions. The enemies of Bangabandhu would create a smokescreen about it to insinuate that Bangabandhu was antagonistic towards Islam. But speeches of Bangabandhu leave no misgivings about his religious views. In 1972 at a public meeting in Feni Bangabandhu declared: 'I'm a Muslim, as a Muslim I will observe all Muslim religious rites and rituals. The Hindus will observe theirs. None will be debarred from free exercise of their religion. I will stick to my religion and you will stick to yours. Isn't there a verse declaring "kul ya ai hal kafirun. La a budu ma taa budun. Ola ana abiduna ma a bud. Oala anta abidunna . Lakum dinukum oaliadin? The verse in the holy Quran says: 'to you your religion and to me mine'. This is what a secular state is all about. Bangladesh will stick to this principle.' (Noishabdia, p.98) [10]

Contrast Bangabandhu's approach with Zia's. To opposite poles they belong. The later started a process of 'Islamization' of politics the first step of which was to remove through the 5th amendment of the constitution the word 'secularism' from the constitution and replace it with "absolute trust and faith in almighty Allah" (Constitution Article 8, clause 1) [13]. In addition to that the preamble to the constitution was preceded by "Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim" [13]. The song 'Amar sonar Bangla' was replaced with recitation from Holy Quran at the opening of all meetings and functions (Chowdhury, p.154) [3]. Curiously, he revived the word 'jindabad' even though the Pakistan era had been over and ended his speeches invariably juxtaposing it next to the word Bangladesh. Such switchover was naturally frowned upon by the progressive section of the society. Zia sprang a bigger surprise on all patriotic citizens of the country by rehabilitating the collaborators in politics. Supposing, for argument's sake, that his purpose was to draw a veil over the past and make a fresh start- in view of the fact that Bangabandhu had granted general pardon for collaborators not guilty of serious crimes- how can one account for his protecting and then rewarding the self-professed killers of Bangabandhu without the slightest bite of conscience? This is perhaps an ideal case where silence speaks louder than speech. The killers of Bangabandhu made no secret of their intention to transform the country into an Islamic Republic: 'The Islamic republic has vanished. We were betrayed from the start by the man we trusted most' (Matin, p. 160) [8]. Col. Rashid, One of the notorious killers, recalls bitterly to a foreign press accusing Khondokar Mostak Ahmed of betrayal. This statement bears eloquent testimony that Bangabandhu's holding fast to secular principles made him the inevitable target of his enemies. As such, the assassination of Bangabandhu was the last nail to the coffin of secular politics.

The insemination of religious politics, as it appears transparent now, spelled doom for the secular Bangladesh Bangabandhu had envisioned. The religious sperm implanted by Zia now grew from strength to strength thriving on the nourishment it received from the parties that were in power and in two decades, during Jamat-backed BNP government's rule, emerged as the untamable monster. Dozens of violent attacks including the 21August tragedy and Holy Artisan massacre were perpetrated by it. Bangladesh is still grappling with this monster euphemistically called religious militancy.

Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangabandhu, deeply imbued with the spirit of secularism her father had instilled into her, picked up the thread of her father's legacy when Awami League came to power in 1996. A defender of secularism, she has revived the original constitution of 1972. In the face of conspiracy at home and abroad she has tried the war criminals, who sided with the Pakistanis in our liberation war and masterminded the killing of the progressive intellectuals of the country to ruin its secular pillars. In the recent times, Bangladesh has earned the praise of the international community by combating religious militancy with a firm hand. Plainly speaking, the secular Bangladesh that one finds today owes much to Bangabandhu's secular ideals.

Conclusion

There is not a scrap of evidence to prove that Bangabandhu ever indulged in religious expediency. Rather he discreetly maintained distance between religion and politics. He promoted religious tolerance but never suffered from the kind of myopia that blind faith breeds. The incorporation of secularism in the constitution speaks volumes for his ideals which he strived all his life to defend. But following his assassination in 1975 the tide turned and the equanimity that came with liberal religious practices became a chimerical dream for decades only to be revived by Sheikh Hasina's government in recent times. In the ultimate analysis it would be evident that the revival of secular spirit in today's Bangladesh is a tangible outcome of the secular foundation that Bangabandhu laid during his lifetime.

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