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## MUSINGS

# Folk Hero Sheikh Mujibur Rahman



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The process through which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975) became a folk hero in Bangladesh, that is to say, the way in which his name became imprinted in the popular consciousness of its people and became legendary began quite early in his life. In his *Ausamapta Atmajiboni* (translated into English as *Unfinished Memoirs*) we read thus how while campaigning in his constituency of Gopalganj to be elected a member of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1953, he came across a very poor old women who had been waiting by her hut to meet him for hours. Although almost destitute, the woman had been looking forward to not only offering him food in her hut but also some money. As she put it to the young politician then, “The prayers of the poor will be with you” in the elections. In other words, he had already become a folk hero among the villagers of his

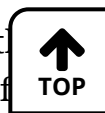


district because of the perception they had that he had the personality and the capacity to work for them and change their lot.

By this time, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had thus become legendary in his part of Bengal for his capacity to work tirelessly for Bengalis and their mother tongue, Bangla. He had endeared himself to his people by then and subsequently by his capacity to protest against injustice and the discriminatory policies of West Pakistani leaders and his ability to endure any kind of hardship and seemingly endless jail terms and to sacrifice all creature comforts for their sake. He had also come close to the hearts of East Bengalis in building up, first the Awami Muslim League, and then the Awami League, and in contesting for elections whenever he was allowed to do so. For these reasons he would travel the length and breadth of the country, leaving his imprint in the popular consciousness of his people throughout the fifties and the sixties with his eloquence and organizational capabilities. The culminating years of such activities that were making him a larger than life politician came in the sixties, when he spearheaded the “Six Points Movement” for autonomy for East Pakistanis and endured years of imprisonment, until mass agitation to achieve autonomy forced the Pakistani authorities to concede to elections and release him as their undisputed champion. It was at this point of his life that he began to be referred to by his followers as “Bangabandhu” (“Friend of the People”) and it is this honorific title bestowed on him by the overwhelming majority of East Bengalis that indicated clearly that a national hero had emerged among all Bangladeshis then.

But Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's elevation to a folk hero idolized and lionized by his people was fully consolidated in the epochal year of 1971. In the national elections held in Pakistan at the end of the previous year, the Awami League led by Rahman had won almost all the seats in the National Legislature and was in a position to form the government of Pakistan. When the defeated leader of the second largest party, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, conspired with the military dictatorship controlling Pakistan at this juncture of that nation's history, and postponed the opening of the National Assembly, Rahman led the course of civil disobedience that had begun with the postponement, and in a historic speech delivered on 7 March, 1971 called for a movement that would lead his people to complete independence from Pakistan.

It is said, “cometh the hour, cometh the man”, and for all Bangladeshis the time had indeed come to confront the West Pakistani rulers with only one option that would be articulated in that extraordinary speech delivered by the man who had been preparing himself for just such an occasion all his life. Like Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream Speech”, this was a speech of a lifetime and came in Mujib's finest hour. The rhetorical brilliance of the speech, the fiery tone and the determination it expressed of leading his people to full independence, and the image of a leader who had risen to the occasion grandly were all conveyed through radio and



television and then taped recordings everywhere in Bangladesh throughout the year and afterwards. Photographs and sketches of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman exhorting his people and cautioning the West Pakistani leaders of the consequences of the confrontational role they had chosen also flooded the media. The speech became the subject of verses, ballads, songs, narratives and paintings and sculpture as well.

But there was more national drama to come that year where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would figure as the larger-than-life protagonist to his people, and the West Pakistanis as the villains of conspiracies directed to wrest away their rights. When he realized that the Pakistanis had been making a show of negotiations with him and his party people, and were actually about to crackdown on all who opposed them, he gave another historical declaration at midnight on March 26 that unambiguously declared independence for all Bengalis of his country and war against the West Pakistani military forces. Although he would be captured in the early morning and taken to West Pakistan as a prisoner till the end of the year, his status as a living legend grew throughout 1971 as his speech was broadcast continuously in the Swadhin Bangla Betar (“the radio station of independent Bangladesh”). Clearly, he had become transformed by his acts of defiance and his oratory and leadership qualities as someone extraordinary and uniquely qualified to lead his people and speak for and about them. Clearly, too, he had become a folk hero whose image and voice had become imprinted forever in the consciousness of the people of Bangladesh.

There were other occasions afterwards that also led to the halo Sheikh Mujibur Rahman acquired in the eyes of his people. His return to an independent Bangladesh on January 10 after a quite miraculous release from Pakistani captivity, another extraordinary speech that he gave in Dhaka on his arrival, and his attempts to direct his country towards peace and prosperity afterwards, also registered in the consciousness of the people of independent Bangladesh in whom the full extent of his contribution to their freedom had become obvious by then. When he was assassinated by renegade army men and malcontents of his own party on August 15, 1975, successive military governments tried to blot out his image publically. But their machinations to erase him from the minds of his people failed miserably. With the return of democracy and the freeing of the media and arts, his image as a folk hero, of the champion of his people, of the lead actor in the drama of Bangladesh's independence and the conqueror of hostile powers arrayed against them was on abundant display in folklore and literature, and in art and film throughout Bangladesh once again.

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