

The Historic 7th March Speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Introduction: 7th March 1971, Bangabandhu gave the finest speech of his life at the erstwhile historic Race Course Maydan. Disregarding the intimidation and threats of the Pakistani Army's tanks, guns and machineguns, and in the presence of a million audience, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared in a booming voice: "**This time, the struggle is for our liberation, this time the struggle is for our independence**".

Background/Circumstances: Under the leadership of Sheikh Muibur Rahman, the Awami League won an absolute majority in the National Assembly elections of Pakistan held on 7 December 1970 by winning 167 out of 169 seats in East Pakistan, with the other two seats going to PDP. The ruling elites in West Pakistan did not accept the election outcome. In total disregard of the majority's mandate, Yahya Khan, on March 1, 1971, decided to postpone the inaugural parliament session imposing curfew. The people of East Pakistan despite military action, staged protest throughout the province. The non-cooperation movement created a stalemate situation in the socio-political arena of East Pakistan. The entire provincial administration automatically came under the command of Mujib. His private residence at Dhanmondi neighbourhood in Dhaka, in effect, became the centre of command in the East Pakistan during March 1971.

On 7th March 1971, Mujib addressed a million people at Race Course ground in Dhaka. He called on the Bangalis to wage a decisive struggle against the Pakistani rulers. He condemned the killing of hundreds of Bangalis, and in a thunderous voice, uttered the words which would be etched into the hearts and minds of every Bangali for years to come. The speech effectively road-mapped the independence of 'Bangladesh' triggering millions of freedom-seeking Bangalis to prepare for a people's war.

Brothers of mine,

Today I appear before you with a heavy heart. You know and understand everything. We tried with our lives. But the painful matter is that now the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and Rangpur are stained with the bloods of my brothers.

Now the people of Bengal want freedom. The people of Bengal want to live. The people of Bengal want to have their rights. What wrong did we commit?

The people of Bangladesh cast their vote overwhelmingly for me, for Awami League. Our National Assembly will sit. We will draw up the Constitution there. And we will build this country. The people of this country will have economic, political and cultural freedom. But it's a matter of great sorrow that today I have to tell painfully the pitiful history of the last twenty-three years: the bloody history of Bengalis tortured in Bengal itself. The history of the last twenty-three years has been one of the agonising cries of men and women. The history of Bengal has been the history where the people of the land have made crimson the streets and highways with their blood.

We gave blood in 1952. After winning the election in 1954, we couldn't even form the government. Proclaiming martial law in 1958, Ayub Khan enslaves us for ten years. During the 'Six Point Movement', our children were gunned down on 7th June 1966. After the fall of Ayub Khan following 'Mass Movement' of 1969, Yahya Khan usurped power. He said he would give constitution and democracy to the nation; we Agreed. Thereafter, the rest is history. There was an election. You know the fault was not ours. Today, I met President Yahya Khan and discussed everything with him. Being the leader not only of Bengal but of the majority party of Pakistan, I requested him to convene the National Assembly on 15th February.

He didn't pay heed, rather yielded to Mr. Bhutto's demand to hold the assembly in the first week of March. We said that was alright. We would sit in the Assembly. I went even to the extent of saying that if anybody, even a lone person proposed something reasonable, we, although the majority, will accept the proposal. Mr. Bhutto came here. He conferred with us and said that the door for discussion was not closed. There would be more discussions. Then, we consulted other leaders and said 'please come and sit together; let's prepare the Constitution through discussion'. Mr. Bhutto said that if the members of West Pakistan came here, the Assembly would turn into a slaughter house. He said whoever would come would be killed. If they came to the Assembly, then from Peshawar to Karachi, all shops would be closed down by force. I said that Assembly would continue; then all of a sudden, the Assembly was closed on 1st March. As President, Mr. Yahya Khan had summoned the Assembly. I said that I would attend. Mr. Bhutto said that he wouldn't. Thirty- five members from West Pakistan came here. Then all of a sudden, the Assembly was closed. The people of Bengal were blamed; I was blamed too. Because of the closure, the people of this country burst into protest. I told them to observe 'hartal' (strike) in a peaceful manner; I told them to close down all mills and factories; the people responded; they spontaneously took to the streets. They firmly pledged to continue their resistance in a peaceful manner.

What did we get? The weapons bought at the expense of our money to protect the country from the invasion of foreign enemies, are now being used against the poor and unarmed people of my country; they are being shot down. We are the majority of the people of Pakistan. Whenever we, Bengalis, have attempted to ascend the height of power, they have swooped upon us. They are our brothers; I asked them 'Why must you shoot your brother? You were deployed to protect this country from the attack of foreign enemies. Mr. Yahya said that I had agreed that there would be a Round Table Conference (RTC) on 10th March. I said no such thing to him. I had a talk with him over the telephone. I told him 'General Yahya Khan, you are President of Pakistan. Come to Dhaka and see how my poor people, my people of Bengal are being shot at, how the mothers of my land are wailing the killing of their sons; how my people are being killed. You come, see, do justice. That's exactly what I told him.

Without any consultation with me or any discussion with us, suddenly after 5 hours of secret meeting, Yahya Khan delivered his speech, in which he dumped all the blame squarely on me, squarely on the people of Bengal. (The crowds say shame, shame). I have said in the meeting, the struggle this time is our struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is the struggle for our independence.

Brothers of mine

The Assembly has been called on the 25th March. The mark of bloods has not yet dried. I had clearly said that on 10th March Mujib Rahman can't joint RTC, treading the bloods of martyrs. They have called the Assembly. But, my demands must first be met:

First, martial law must be withdrawn: - All army personnel must go back to the barracks; There has to be an inquiry into the way the killings were carried out and the power has to be handed over to the people's representatives. Only then, we will consider whether we can sit in the Assembly or not. Before that, we can't sit in the Assembly. The people have not given me that right.

Brothers of mine

Do you have faith in me? (The crowds says yes yes). I don't want Prime Ministership. We want to establish the right of the people of this country. I want to say in clear terms that from now on, all courts, magistracies, offices and educational institutions in Bangladesh will remain closed sine die.

To ensure that no suffering is inflicted on the poor people, to ensure that my people do not suffer, from tomorrow, the following things will be put out of range of the 'hartal'. Rickshaws and

hackney carriages will work; railway trains and launches will run. But the Secretariat, Supreme Court, High Court, Judge's Court and semi-government offices like WAPDA (Pakistan Water Development Authority) will not function. All employees will draw their salaries on the 28th of the month. If salaries are not paid, if one more shot is fired and if my people are killed again, my request to you: build a fortress in each and every home. Face the enemy with whatever you have. In case I can't give you any further instruction, I tell you- close all roads and highway indefinitely.

We will starve them to death. We will make them go without water and choke them to death. You are our brothers. You stay in your barracks, no one will say anything to you. But don't ever try to shoot us. This will do you no good. You can't keep seven crore people subjugated. Since we have learnt to die, no one can dominate us. We, from Awami League, will try our best to help those who are embracing martyrdom and those who have received injuries. Those who are capable, please extend your monetary support, whatever you can, to our relief fund. And every owner of industries will pay salaries to all workers who participated in the 7-day 'hartal'. My instruction to government officials is that you must obey what I say. From now on, tax will not be paid till such time as the freedom of our country is achieved; no one will pay anything. Listen and bear in mind, the enemy has infiltrated our ranks to cause confusion, division and sow discord among us.

Hindus-Muslims, Bengalis-non-Bengalis, all those who live in this Bengal are our brothers. The responsibility of protecting them is on you. Ensure that our reputation is not smeared in any way. The employees of the Radio and Television, please bear in mind that if our words are not broadcast by the radio, then no Bengali shall go to the radio station. If our news is not broadcast by Television, then no Bengali will go to the Television station. Bank shall remain open for two hours every day so that the people can get their salaries. But from East Bengal, a single penny will not be allowed to be remitted to West Pakistan. Telephone and Telegraph service will remain operational in East Bengal. They shall keep on sending our news to foreign news media. But if there is any sinister move to annihilate the people of this country, the Bengalis, you will have to keep very careful watch.

I am requesting you; you are my brothers. Do not make this country a hell and destroy it. We will not see each other's face in the future. If we can solve things in a peaceful manner, we can at least live as brothers. That is why I am requesting you, do not try and run military rule in my country.

Secondly, in every village, every locality, every union and every sub-division, establish '**Resistance Council**' under the leadership of the Awami League. And be ready with whatever you have.

Bear in mind that since we have given blood, we will give more. By the grace of Allah, we will surely liberate the people of this country.

The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is the struggle for our independence.

'Joy Bangla'

Reference:

1. The Father of The Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on 7th March, 1971- Translate: Page 8-10
*** UNESCO has recognised the “7th March Speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman” as part of the ‘World’s Documentary Heritage’- the decision has announced at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on October 30, 2017.
2. https://cri.org.bd/publication/Mujib/Mujib-The_Voice_of_Freedom.pdf
3. <https://albd.org/articles/news/31534/Historical-7th-March-Speech-of-Bangabandhu>
4. <https://albd.org/articles/general/33097/Historic-7-March-Speech:-Context-and-Significance>