

II

A False Start

If he had asked us to eat grass or to dig the earth with our bare hands we would have done it for him. But look how he behaved!

—Major Farook Rahman

A hotel room in central London, albeit a plush suite in Claridges, is an unlikely setting for the installation of the first president of the world's newest and eighth most populous state. Nevertheless on this grey winter's morning Razaul Karim, the acting head of the London Mission, was quietly informing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the new role that destiny had designed for him.

It was a little after 9 am on 8 January, 1972, a Saturday, exactly 23 days after the formal birth of Bangladesh was achieved by the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani troops to the Indian army in Dhaka. President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who only a few days earlier had replaced General Yahya Khan as the new Pakistani head of state, had unexpectedly put Mujib and his former constitutional adviser, Dr Kamal Hussain, on a PIA Boeing for a secret flight to London. Why London? No one now remains to tell the full truth about this incident. But when the plane touched down at Heathrow airport at 6.30 that morning it brought to a happy ending the months of agonising uncertainty about Mujib's fate.

Although he looked travel worn, Mujib felt gloriously alive as he waited for the jubilant crowds to descend upon him. He ambled compulsively from room to room, the deferential Karim trailing behind. He admired the flowers. Now and then he flopped onto a deep-cushioned sofa as though testing its comfort. But what attracted him most were the big glass windows. He peered through them at the traffic on the road outside like a fascinated child. Mujib was savouring his first full day of freedom after nine months of solitary confinement within the shadow of the gallows in a Pakistani prison.

I had been tipped off about Mujib's arrival by Nicholas Carroll, deputy foreign editor of The Sunday Times, who had heard it as a BBC news flash. Mujib was an old friend and, professional interest apart, I was delighted to meet him again after the trauma each of us had suffered in the preceding year in the struggle for Bangladesh. We had first met in 1956 in the Karachi residence of his political mentor, Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who later became prime minister of Pakistan. The friendship developed in the summer of 1958 when for almost a month we shared hotel rooms in Washington, Flagstaff (Arizona), San Francisco and Los Angeles during a tour at the invitation of the American government. I still have a photograph of us taken in Paramount Studios, Hollywood, with our host the great movie mogul Cecil B. De Mille, Mickey Rooney and Ava Gardner.

It was a happy time. Mujib was then very much a junior politician without the inhibition of having to maintain a political image. It was summer. He was a million miles from home and let his hair down. In later years I used to tease Mujib that I knew him better than his wife. And once when things got rough

in Bangladesh in 1973, I told my exasperated friend, 'Why don't you give it all up. You can make a better living at cards.' Indeed he could. If I could locate them now I'm sure three Indonesian journalists would confirm this.

We were on the night train from the Grand Canyon to Los Angeles and after dinner got together with the Indonesians for a game of 'Flush', the three-card poker popular in the East. The opening rounds were even. Then we began to lose steadily. Soon it became obvious from the way the cards were running that we were being sharked. I suggested to Mujib that we stop and cut our losses. Mujib silenced me. He asked the Pullman attendant for a new pack, shuffled the cards and began to deal. Abruptly the 'luck' changed. Try as they might all through the long night the Indonesians were never able to make it again. When we pulled into Los Angeles next morning Mujib and I were richer by \$386, a wrist watch, a Parker 51 with a gold cap, and a thin gold ring in the shape of a snake.

I asked Mujib how he did it. His answer is seared in my memory. 'When you play with gentlemen, you play like a gentleman. But when you play with bastards, make sure you play like a bigger bastard. Otherwise you will lose.' Then he added with a laugh, 'Don't forget I have had good teachers.' It was a startling glimpse of this earthy, gut-fighting politician and the intrigue and the violence to which he was bred. Later, when his star soared and he began to make headlines, I would recall these words and have no difficulty predicting the response he would make to the crisis of the moment.

Now we were together again, friends/professionals, in London, with Mujib about to start the most momentous game of his life. We talked, and I sat and listened while he talked to the others. And when I finally left to write my story it was with the unsettling impression that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangabandhu, President and Bangladesh's man on a white charger, at the moment of taking up his stewardship had only the foggiest notion of what it was all about.

What's more, he was secretly nursing a tentative deal with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto which would have maintained a 'link' between Pakistan and its breakaway province, Bangladesh.

I got a glimpse of this unsavoury deal, which was totally at variance with the Bangladeshi mood, when Mujib confided to me: 'I have a big scoop for you. We are going to keep some link with Pakistan but I can't say anything more till I have talked it over with the others. And for God's sake don't you write anything till I tell you.'

Apparently Bhutto, during the course of some lengthy private conversations with Mujib in a government rest house on the outskirts of Rawalpindi just before he sent him out to London, had talked him into an understanding for a 'link' with Pakistan. Thus the astute Bhutto hoped to inveigle Mujib into a concession that would have had the effect of turning the clock back and negating the Bangladeshi freedom struggle. What exactly the formula was, Mujib did not tell me. But my own instant reaction to the disclosure was one of horror. 'Are you mad?' I told him. 'Don't you know what's happened in Bangladesh? After what the people have gone through they will lynch you on the streets of Dhaka, Bangabandhu or no Bangabandhu, if you so much as utter one word about a link.'

Mujib did not have time to answer me. We were interrupted by the Indian High Commissioner, B. K. Nehru, who wanted a private word with him. Mujib's re-education had begun.

Mujib's isolation in prison had been total during the nine months Bangladesh

was being fashioned in the crucible of genocide and war. He received no letters, read no newspapers, had no radio to listen to. He was not allowed to converse even with his jailors. He did not know how his country had been devastated by the Pakistan army or how two million people had died. And just as the world was uncertain about his fate, Mujib did not know the fate of his own wife and children.

Mujib had gone to jail the leader of the biggest party in the newly elected Pakistan National Assembly, valiantly striving for a wide-ranging autonomy for his province. Since then East Pakistan's autonomy demand had made way for the reality of Bangladesh's independence. Even the map had changed for Pakistan. It was not surprising, therefore, that when Mujib emerged once more into the sunshine, it was like a latter-day Rip Van Winkle, out of touch and out of tune with the times. And, it would seem from the circumstances, he had got up from the wrong side of the bed.

Time had stood still for Mujib the man, but not for Mujib the martyr. One of his party men, an Awami League adviser in Dhaka, was quoted as saying 'It's astonishing that this man can sit out the war for nine months and come back stronger than he ever was before.' Mujib's enshrinement was far advanced. 'You have been confined, but your spirit could not be imprisoned,' the Indian prime minister Mrs Indira Gandhi, said of him. 'You have become a symbol of the voice of the oppressed . . .'¹

It was not the first time that imprisonment had made a demi-god of a national hero. But in Mujib's case the embellishing of the legend was a Bengali phenomenon, an exaggerated emotionalism which would become all the more unseemly when its application was abruptly reversed the day Mujib was killed. Now, however, the headlines roared 'Mujib is a magic word. Mujib is a miracle name.'²

Setting the scene at that time in Dhaka, Martin Woollacott said in a cable to the Guardian: 'Bengalis are awaiting the return of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in reverential, near religious mood. The legend is about to be made flesh . . . (Ordinary Bengalis have mentally invested the Sheikh with extraordinary powers. Little credit goes to the Bangladesh government or to the Indian government for the successful liberation of the country: All belongs to the Sheikh, who controlled events even from a prison cell thousands of miles away.)'³

Man had been made mountain and now the mountain was being asked to move. Mujib, however, on that winter's day in London was not in a mood for miracles. The strain of 'the long journey from darkness to light'⁴ had begun to tell. 'I need some rest,' he told me. 'I want to relax in London for a few days. Then I will go back to my people. I will not do anything till I have visited every district and seen every face.' These were Mujib's plans—until the telephones began to ring.

The first call came through at 10.30. It was the Bangladesh Mission in Calcutta. Answering the squawks from the other end of the line, Mujib said 'Don't worry. I am safe. I am alive and in good health. Please tell them all—telephone to Dhaka—I endorse what has happened. Bangladesh has come to stay. No one on earth can change that fact.' There were three other telephones in the suite and they all began ringing together. Razaul Karim picked one up. 'Sir,' he called out, 'Dhaka on the line. The Prime Minister (Tajuddin Ahmad) would like to talk to you.' Another phone rang. 'Sir, you are wanted by Calcutta.' Then more calls from Dhaka and Calcutta, one from Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi and another from Edward Heath, Britain's Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing Street. By 11 o'clock Suite 112 in Claridges had become the

temporary capital of Bangladesh. By that time also it was painfully clear to Mujib that if he did not get to Dhaka very quickly there was grave danger of the new government falling apart and the risk of civil strife. The war was over. The in-fighting, the jostling for power in the Awami League had begun.

Peter Hazelhurst in a despatch from Dhaka to the Times, London, painted a gloomy picture of the situation in the city. 'As the euphoria of victory begins wearing thin, the sense of jubilation is rapidly being replaced by a national mood of suspicion and resentment against the outsider . . . There are also signs that the liberation movement is becoming disillusioned with the Awami League government . . . (It is clear that the only cementing force capable of holding the country together is the charisma surrounding the one and only man who counts in the country today, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.)'⁵

The Awami League government, headed by prime minister Tajuddin Ahmad, ensconced in Dhaka was little more than a government in name. Its legitimacy was not questioned, but, paradoxically, its right to lead was. During the Bengali upsurge against the Pakistan army's campaign of genocide in East Pakistan in 1971, the Mujibnagar Government, as the government in exile in India was known, served as an umbrella for resistance. But Mujibnagar, true to its name (there is no such place) was an unsubstantial thing, the Bengali equivalent of 'God's Little Acre', moved about as convenience dictated. Mujibnagar was neither the command console nor the cutting edge of the resistance. Things were done in its name by fighting men in the field. They accepted only the most formal patronage and they gave only a ritual allegiance. Peter Hazelhurst, who is quoted earlier, with great perception underscored the distinction between 'the liberation movement' and the 'Awami League government'.

The most expositive commentary on the role of the Mujibnagar government is the fact that at the end of the liberation war it had no place whatsoever in the formal surrender of the Pakistani troops in Dhaka on 16 December, 1971. Nevertheless, shortly after that date the Awami Leaguers were installed as the government in Dhaka with no challenge to its legality. Welcoming the ministers when they flew in from Calcutta were members of all political parties, including Professor Muzaffar Ahmad, chairman of the left-wing National Awami Party (NAP), and the legendary Moni Singh of the Communist Party.⁶

The first and perhaps only real decision the 'government' took was to reject off-hand Professor Muzaffar Ahmad's proposal to have an interim national government of all parties. But before that the first government of Bangladesh had begun to show unmistakable signs of coming unstuck.

It was a mishmash of political entities, divided not so much by ideological considerations as by the extra-territorial labels that, rightly or wrongly, its members were supposed to wear. Thus ministers were commonly classified as pro-America, pro-Russia or pro-India. In this context Tajuddin Ahmad was labelled pro-India, Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed as pro-America and Abdus Samad Azad pro-Russia. (Major Farook was to complain later: 'I couldn't find anyone who was supposed to be pro-Bangladesh!'). Tajuddin Ahmad, the prime minister and most able administrator among the lot, was the first among equals and no more. The system was a collegiate one. The throne was still vacant.⁷

These internal dissensions gravely handicapped the government in facing up to its many problems—and they were monstrous and pressing. The depredations of the Pakistan army during the eight months of Bengali resistance and the attrition during the 14-day war had devastated the country. There was no food or medicines in the shops. The jute and tea industries, in normal times the principal foreign exchange earners, had collapsed. At the same time ten

million refugees who had gone to India and twenty million people displaced within the country needed shelter in addition to food and clothing. It was a mad race against time for the monsoons would shut down the country in summer. Topping it all was the destruction of the transport and communications systems which made the movement of relief supplies a daily miracle. There was extensive damage to the railway track, signalling equipment and rolling stock. In a delta area where cross-country movement is dependent on bridges and river ferries, every major bridge (at least 280 of varying sizes) and more than half the river transport were destroyed. The remaining river craft could only be used at great risk because in most cases navigation lights and buoys marking the narrow channels had been blown up along with the command stations of the delta navigation system. Chittagong, one of the country's two ports and the principal entry point for food imports, was rendered unservicable by 29 wrecks blocking the Karnafulli River channel. Fewer than 1000 of the country's 8000 truck fleet were servicable. There was no gasoline. Bangladesh desperately needed 2.5 million tons of food to avoid famine. And when this was forthcoming from the international community it required an additional miracle to get it to the country's 60,000 villages.

I have not been able to confirm it, but there was an hilarious story making the rounds in Dhaka in January, 1972, when the jostling among the Awami League ministers was at its height. Every move on the macabre chessboard was being carefully scrutinised for advantage and in these circumstances there was, apparently, no agreement about who should preside over the 'historic' first meeting of the cabinet. Should it be Vice President Syed Nazrul Islam or should it be Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad? The issue was resolved with Eastern ingenuity. It took the form of a tea party with Mujib's uncle representing the absent Bangabandhu, as chief guest. The cakes and the ministers were placed on two long tables joined at one end by a smaller one. In the middle of this head table sat Mujib's uncle flanked by Tajuddin Ahmad and Syed Nazrul Islam. Tea was served. The photographers were called in. The cabinet had its first meeting. Thus history was inscribed without loss of face!

No such delicacy was shown in another matter. Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed, who was 'foreign minister' in the Mujibnagar government based in Calcutta, turned up at his office in Dhaka to find his chair occupied by a junior colleague, Abdus Samad Azad. It transpired that Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad had removed Moshtaque from the job because he had been secretly conspiring with the Americans for a political compromise intended to avoid the break-up of Pakistan. Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, was anxious to help Pakistan because he was using it as a secret channel of communication to arrange President Nixon's historic visit to China. To this end the Americans began to secretly negotiate with Moshtaque. His colleagues never forgive Moshtaque this treachery. Thus, as part of the treatment, no one bothered to inform him that Tajuddin, on moving to Dhaka, had overnight changed his job.

Khandaker Moshtaque swallowed the insult. But he did not forget. Later, when he got the opportunity, he extracted a terrible vengeance on those who had insulted him.

The war had also left an estimated 350,000 guns with vast quantities of ammunition in private hands. Since the people were desperate short of their daily necessities, the underground armouries inevitably helped to create 'a dangerous law and order situation' as the official jargon described it. Topping this were numerous bands of heavily armed 'guerillas' such as those led by

Sheikh Moni, Nurul Alam Siddiqui, Tofail and Siraj whose attitude to the government was both militant and recalcitrant. They swore they would obey only Sheikh Mujib's orders.⁸

In these circumstances it is understandable that the Awami League ministers and politicians should burn up the telephone line to London demanding Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's immediate return to Bangladesh. He had no alternative.

The panoply of a state welcome is an impressive spectacle. The flags, massed bands, the cadence of the slow march of a Sovereign's guard of honour, the 21-gun salute: they are all carefully designed to impress. India, with its timeless pageantry and instant crowds gives the show a majestic dimension. When New Delhi rolled out the red carpet for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman it was with a fervour that those present will always remember. While flying from London to Dhaka, Mujib had made a brief stop-over in New Delhi to thank India for the assistance it had given his people ('The people of India are the best friends of my people.'). On hand to greet him at Palam Airport on the morning of 10 January 1972, were the President, Dr. V. V. Giri, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Chiefs of the three Indian Defence Services whose prowess had underwritten the creation of Bangladesh, the Cabinet ministers and members of the Diplomatic Corps. Even more memorable than this glittering receiving line, I was told by one of those present, was the vibrant intrusion of uncounted millions of faceless Indians—the people who had supported the Bangladesh struggle for independence—who joined the welcoming through All India Radio's broadcast.

The heart of India was in New Delhi that morning. My friend, Narayan Swami, who is normally very cynical, recalled with awe: 'It was as if the radio had not only taken the ceremony to the people but by some strange mystique had also brought them to the spectator stands. You could feel them there!'

Mujib was deeply moved by it all. Until then a flag car was the most he had rated by way of official protocol, and that too very briefly during two short spells as a provincial minister in East Pakistan. Now, he was to tell his family: 'India itself turned out to do me honour.'

The transformation to demi-god was completed a few hours later when Mujib returning to Dhaka was overwhelmed by the reception he got. Thousands of people crammed every vantage point in the airport terminal building. Many hundreds of thousands more linked the roads all the way to the airport. And when Mujib reached Suhrawardy Udyan, the sprawling old race course where he had last spoken to the people at the height of the civil disobedience on 7 March of the previous year, it was as if a human sea had been packed into the three square mile arena. Nothing like this had happened ever before in Dhaka. There's been nothing like it since then. The frenzied cheering, the extravagant praise, the public worship and obeisance were beyond the wildest dreams of any man.

The day's events would leave a lasting impression on Mujib because, if anything, he was an impressionable man and very vain. In his mind's eye there would henceforth always be cheering crowds and flags. But the trouble was that even before the last echoes of the cheering had faded, Mujib the demi-god, was bought face-to-face with an overwhelming reality.

'My heart sang to be home again and among my people' he told me at our first meeting in Dhaka after London. 'But then I was brought face-to-face with the greatest man-made disaster in history. I could never imagine the magnitude of the catastrophe. They have killed more than three million of my people. They have raped our mothers and our sisters and have butchered our

children. More than 30 per cent of all houses have been destroyed. Bangladesh has been flattened. There is danger of famine. We need help.'

My friend spelled out his nightmare problem with a series of questions he threw at me: 'What do you do about currency? Where do you get food? Industries are dead. Commerce is dead. How do you start them again? What do you do about defence? I have no administration. Where do I get one? Tell me, how do you start a country?'

Mujib's outburst was only temporary. There was another quick shift in mood, confidence returning with every sweep of his hands as though plucking it from the air. He was the demi-god again. 'I tell you I can do it; I will do it with these hands.'

Mujib's return to Dhaka had averted the threat of civil war in Bangladesh and given the government the substance and authority it had hitherto lacked. But this did not mean an end to the intrigue and in-fighting within the cabinet nor the extinction of the armed bands operating as a law unto themselves in the countryside. Only now Mujib's presence had temporarily put a lid on them. But exist they did in various shadowy forms which were for the moment tolerated by Mujib so long as the combatants made both public and private obeisance to him. But the internal pressures did influence his style. He conducted himself not as the 'father of the nation' nor as its all-serving President, but rather as the President of the Awami League. He played politics with his henchmen. He got embroiled in their intrigues. The savage in-fighting only whetted his natural instinct to retain all power for himself. That's why he chose to be Bangladesh's first Prime Minister, not its first President.

As mentioned earlier, the President's throne had been kept vacant for Mujib. Indeed he had been hailed as President of Bangladesh on reaching London and it was universally assumed that he would continue in that role. But being Head of State in a Westminster-style government meant Mujib should allow executive authority to vest in the Prime Minister, in this case Tajuddin Ahmad. Here came the rub. Mujib's perceptions were too narrow. He had a one-track mind in the matter of power. If the system required the Prime Minister to hold the reins of authority, then Mujib would be Prime Minister. But if instead supreme executive authority was vested in the President, then Mujib would be the President. His family and his shallow, sycophantic advisers would urge him on for the elementary reason that the more executive power he wielded the closer they would be to the fountain of patronage and wealth.

A minor reason for Mujib's decision—which was privately made much of at that time—were the anomalies there were about Tajuddin's position as Prime Minister. No one questioned Tajuddin's ability to run the administration. His authority, however, was never fully accepted by his senior colleagues. Even during the 'Mujibnagar' days they had resented his elevation with Indian help to the top job. In their eyes Tajuddin, despite his ability, remained almost an upstart. He had been general secretary of the 'provincial' Awami League, a relatively junior position, when the independence struggle began in March 1971, and there were several others holding 'national' office who considered themselves higher in the party's pecking order. Moreover, rightly or wrongly, Tajuddin had been lumbered with the pro-Indian label. In the circumstances this was a major impediment since it was generally recognised at that time that Bangladesh's entanglement with India should be speedily ended in favour of a 'regularised relationship' which would eliminate international objections to the recognition of the new state.¹⁰

Mujib kicked Tajuddin sideways and became Prime Minister. But at the

same time he made sure that the Head of State would in fact be a sinecure and never a danger to him. For that role he chose a non-political person, the meekest, most inoffensive man he could find, Justice Abu Sayed Chowdhury, who had shot to prominence as the international spokesman for the Mujibnagar government. President Chowdhury was admirably docile. And so that there should be no misunderstanding about his role he sported a large Mujib badge on his coat.

The scene in Gonobaban in the early days of Mujib's rule was a 20th century parody of a Moghul court. Mujib had an office in the secretariat but he spent only a minimum amount of time there, preferring to function from his official residence which he used as a private office. Its relaxed atmosphere was more to his taste. There he would hold court for his cronies, for party men and petitioners who like bees to a honeypot gravitated to Dhaka with outstretched hands. They would descend on him in big groups and small. When ushered into the presence they would garland Bangabandhu, touch his feet, weep loudly. Some would burst into song—some well-known Bengali folksong—and Mujib, eyes opaque with emotion, would join in. In between he would have a quiet word with one of his ministers, instruct a civil servant about some urgent matter of state, and receive visiting reporters and VIPs who came to see the uncrowned king of the world's newest state.

Everyone went away with a promise of action. Mujib would grab the paper from the outstretched hands of a petitioner, pat him on the cheek, then wave him on. 'Go. I will see to it.' That was the last the petitioner, or Mujib, would hear about it. Later, when commenting on Mujib's assassination, my friend, Abu Musa, a perceptive but disillusioned journalist, would tell me: 'He promised everything and he betrayed everyone.'

Soon the dual roles he had undertaken began to show up the folly of the arrangement. As prime minister, Mujib was required to inject harsh discipline into the government, to recreate a country from scratch along orderly lines. Most of all he had to sustain and guide into channels of reconstruction the tremendous patriotic fervour that galvanised the people in 1971. Mujib could do none of these things. As Bangabandhu, the friend and father-figure, Mujib had to be magnanimous, forgiving and helpful. This role was more suited to his nature, for Mujib was large-hearted, a kindly man, generous to a fault and one who never forgot a face or a friendship. Mujib did not have the capacity to compartment his hats. Every moment of the day he was simultaneously Prime Minister and Bangabandhu. The contradictions inherent in this situation inevitably led to chaos.

I was given a vivid example of the shape of things to come shortly after Mujib had been sworn in as Prime Minister. Just before the Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Azha, Bangabandhu, it transpired, had ordered that the workers of the Adamjee Jute Mills near Narayanganj be given one month's wages immediately in settlement of arrears. This was heartening news for the starving workers of the world's biggest jute mill. Like the rest of industry, the mill had come to a grinding halt with the outbreak of the India-Pakistan war the previous month, leaving thousands of workers not only unemployed but also unpaid for the work they had done. The owners had abandoned the mills with the advent of Bangladesh. There was not enough money to meet the payroll. Now the great festival, the first since independence, was approaching. Bangabandhu's intervention was therefore joyfully received.

When I called at the mill at 9.30 the next morning, I found at least 3000 people queued up outside the gates in a buoyant mood. Inside the mill the paymaster was well organised. A dozen tables had been placed in the com-

pound. Each had a tally clerk, a ledger, tin moneybox, pen and inkpot. The only thing missing was the money. 'They money is coming from Dhaka' he told me. 'We are waiting for it.'

They waited and waited and waited. By 2 pm there was still no sign of the money. But that time angry cries and stones were coming over the wall from the seething crowd outside. The workers were demanding to be paid ... 'as Bangabandhu ordered'. The paymaster, who had become a nervous wreck, had sent an SOS to the Deputy Commissioner, who in turn had arranged for an army contingent to reinforce the police guard to prevent the gates being battered down.

Before things got worse, someone had the bright idea of rushing a message to Bangabandhu 'to appraise him of the situation'. Accordingly a young officer was drafted for this purpose. Since he planned to sneak out by way of the river, I decided it would be the better part of valour not to stay behind. Two hours later we were in Gonobaban, Mujib's official residence, and the young officer was explaining the problem. Mujib was furious. He couldn't believe his orders had not been carried out after he had made a public commitment. 'Why have they not been paid?' he bellowed. 'I gave orders it should be done this morning. Who is responsible?'

His temper sparked a flurry of activity. Assistant Secretaries and PAs rushed up and down the crowded corridors looking for someone. When the offending officer from the Finance Ministry was finally brought before Mujib he explained that under the new regulations the mills could not draw more than 100,000 Takkas from the bank without special sanction and he had been patiently waiting in an ante-room for Bangabandhu's 'Daskat' (authorisation) for it. Mujib had all day been receiving a flood of visitors: party workers, old friends, relatives, senior civil servants with files and ministers wanting a quiet word in his ear. The officious guardians of the Prime Minister's door had apparently thought the matter of paying 3000 workers not important enough to 'disturb' him and the officer requiring authorisation for money had been kept out. Mujib scolded them. He ordered a senior Awami Leaguer to 'proceed to Narayanganj immediately and promise the workers that Inshah Allah, they definitely will be paid tomorrow'.

The young officer from the mill was shattered by the experience. When I took him out for a belated lunch, he told me: 'Bangabandhu commands there shall be rain and he cannot understand why the rain does not fall. God help us!'

The Prime Minister's house was a long way from Tungipara, the tiny village in Faridpur district where Mujib was born on 17 March, 1920, one of six children in a middle class family of modest means. His father, Lutfur Rahman, was an official of the local district court. When Mujib went to the mission school in Gopalganj his studies were interrupted for a while by an attack of beriberi which permanently affected his eye-sight. He finished high school when he was 22.

At an early age he displayed the qualities which would one day make him the central figure in the politics of the India sub-continent. One was a hyper-active social conscience; another an over-riding passion for politics. When ten years old he was caught distributing rice from the family supplies to tenant farmers who worked the property. Mujib told his father: 'They were hungry, and we have all these things.' Nineteen years later while a law student in Dhaka University, Mujib received a two and a half year jail sentence for championing another underdog, this time the university's menial workers. He

grandly explained: 'I did not come to the university to bow my head to injustice.' But before that, when he was 17, he was caught in the front line of an anti-British demonstration and spent six days in jail. The experience only whetted his appetite for politics.

The tumultuous events of the early 1940s when the demand for Pakistan as a separate state for the Muslims of the sub-continent was pressed by the Muslim League, came as food and drink to the young Mujib. He was then a student of history and political science in the Islamia College, Calcutta. Mujib flung himself into the Pakistan movement. Within months his great talent for political organising began to be noticed and he moved up rapidly in the hierarchy of the Muslim League. When graduation coincided with the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Mujib moved to Dhaka the capital of East Pakistan province, and enrolled as a student of law in Dhaka University.

One day in March, 1948, he joined thousands of other Bengalis in the Paltan Maidan to hear Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, speak on his one and only visit to the eastern province. They had gone to cheer the Quaid-i-Azam or 'great Leader', but Mr. Jinnah stunned his audience when he bluntly told them 'Urdu is going to be the lingua franca of this country ... Anyone who says anything else is an enemy of Pakistan.'

Bengalis are nothing without their culture and the language is its greatest manifestation. The support of the Bengali Muslims for the Pakistan cause had been fundamental to its success. Even at that time they constituted more than half the new state's population. Yet here was the Pakistan Head of State asking them to forswear the Bengali language in favour of Urdu which he arrogantly equated with Islam, the established religion of Pakistan. Mr. Jinnah's remarks therefore came as a slap in the face of the Bengalis. It was doubly galling to the students in the vanguard of the language movement. Apart from language and culture, it was an economic proposition which would put the young Bengali at serious disadvantage with his counterpart in West Pakistan who would automatically have command over Urdu since it was widely spoken there. The Bengali student would have to learn an additional language, Urdu, along with the burden of his regular studies in order to qualify for a decent job in the government or outside.¹¹

The angry students at the meeting, Mujib among them, immediately rose in protest. They carried the agitation to the streets. From there it quickly spread to the rest of the province to become the first step in the Bengali disenchantment with Pakistan. Meanwhile Mujib, as one of the ring leaders, was clapped into jail for seven days. It was his first taste of solitary confinement.

The language agitation marked the turning point in Mujib's life. Henceforth he would turn his back on sectarian politics, which he condemned as divisive, giving himself fully to a relentless crusade against the economic and political exploitation of the Bengalis by their compatriots in West Pakistan.

Mujib's great strength—and success—lay in an elemental ability to fathom the full measure of his people's emotions and to arouse and articulate them with a resounding eloquence. He had a fantastic ability to relate to crowds. Because of this his opponents would deride him as a rabble rouser. However that may be, time and circumstance put a high premium on his talent and at a crucial moment he became the symbol and supreme spokesman of a gigantic human upsurge against discrimination and tyranny. For his pains Mujib was cruelly hounded, spending 11½ years of the next 20 in Pakistani prisons. Martyrdom, however, only served to enhance his image. 'He was a great man before,' someone once said, 'But those bastards made him even greater.'

Mujib only briefly savoured the fruits of ministerial office. He had neither

the taste nor the talent for it. In his second short spell as a provincial minister (in 1956 when he held the portfolios of Commerce, Labour and Industries, and Anti-Corruption in Aaur Rahman Khan's Awami League cabinet), Mujib couldn't stomach the routine. So he requested permission to bow out and devote his restless energy to reorganising the Awami League. Field work, his first love, remained his forte and took him to the top. But this apostle of agitation was never able to overcome the fundamental flaws in his make-up. Mujib saw everything in simplistic terms. He had a tendency to over-simplify even the most complex economic and agricultural problems. And to an overriding obsession for power was added an immensely suspicious nature. He would unscrupulously intrigue to eliminate the slightest threat to his supremacy, however imagined it might be. This was the dark side of the beguiling moon. When Mujib became Prime Minister of Bangladesh it was these traits, more than anything else in his complex character, that came to the fore.

Two weeks after he had installed himself in Dhaka I asked him if he still had a mind to undertake the meet-the-people tours he had planned in London. Mujib was affronted by my question. 'How can I do it?' he said very crossly. 'Don't you see I have to erect an administration?' He was doing this in the free-wheeling Mujib style. Available bureaucrats were posted under his direction. Even office assistants and clerks were not too small for his attention. Offices in the secretariat began filling with an odd assortment of people, many of them quite evidently not at all suitable. Sinecurists were found everywhere.

Many appointments were made on the basis of a nodding acquaintance with Mujib or on the recommendation of his close friends. The Awami League leaders had been installed in key positions and they brought in their relatives and friends. Some even took commission for a chit. You had to have a god-father to get a job. If you had one, all disqualifications were overlooked, even the cardinal sin of collaboration with the defeated Pakistan military regime.

A prime example was Mahboobul Alam, the Dhaka correspondent of DAWN. Published in Karachi, DAWN was the leading English-language newspaper of West Pakistan and those connected with it were held in esteem by the authorities. After the Pakistan army had launched its campaign of genocide in East Pakistan, West Pakistanis in Dhaka used to jokingly refer to Mahboobul Alam as a 'sarkari' (i.e. pro-government) Bengali to differentiate from the other Bengali journalists who were either openly hostile or sullenly uncooperative. True to this reputation, Mahboobul Alam later that year wrote scripts for Radio Pakistan's PLAIN TRUTH programme—a highly-coloured propaganda or disinformation effort aimed at the Bangladeshi freedom struggle. For this he was paid between Rs 30 and Rs 50 per piece, about £4 at the prevailing rate of exchange. After the liberation of Bangladesh Mahboobul Alam found himself both without a job and covered with the odium of having betrayed the freedom movement by backing the wrong side. But instead of being locked up in jail on charges of collaboration, as another journalist writing for PLAIN TRUTH was, Mahboobul Alam wangled a job, of all things, as Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman's press officer. But because of the stink it created even Mujib had to get rid of him. It must make the Bangladeshi martyrs turn in their graves to know that this posturing turn-coat, as some others like him, went on to become a Bangladeshi ambassador.

Before long the carnival atmosphere of Gonobaban began to assume a most sinister aspect. Mujib, it was evident, had not erected a new administration of Bangladeshi nationalists filled with patriotic zeal. What he had done between the rounds of musical chairs, was to retain and refurbish the old

discredited bureaucracy of the erstwhile East Pakistan. Unlike the large mass of Bengali military officers and men who had actively fought against the Pakistanis or had suffered the agony of being disarmed, isolated and marooned in West Pakistan, many of the civilian officers of East Pakistan administration—with some notable exceptions—had for the most part remained in their jobs and ostensibly loyal to Pakistan during the Liberation War. A variety of reasons were advanced for not joining the resistance. A few had ideological reservations about the Bangladesh movement because of the support it was receiving from India. Others found excuses to play it safe and not to risk jobs and property. Some—and a lot of policemen fall into this category—even distinguished themselves as instruments for the repression of their own people. When Bangladesh became independent on 16th December, 1971, they quickly jumped on the bandwagon, proclaiming their new-found nationalism as loudly as they had denied it the week before. For this these turncoats were derisively dubbed the '16th Division'.

M. R. Akthar ('Mukul') in his book 'Mujibur Rakta Lal', trenchantly observed: 'There is no parallel in the history of any country where after a protracted and bloody liberation war the defeated bureaucracy and the military officers were not only given continuity of service but were also accepted in the new regime with great respect while the patriots were excluded.'

I am not one of those who advocated a witch hunt of collaborators. Far from it. As we will see later, there were obvious pitfalls in that direction since in the circumstances the charge of collaboration could be—and was—used by knaves to pay off old scores or to demolish political opponents. The objection was to place in the most sensitive and influential positions men who had no intrinsic dedication and only an accidental loyalty to the new state. During the crucial days of 1971 some of these provincial civil servants had shown themselves to be utterly selfish, opportunistic and alienated from the mainstream of the national upsurge. It could hardly be expected that they suddenly, overnight, become selflessly dedicated to the uplift of Bangladesh or, in the circumstances, be immune to the immense opportunities for aggrandizement their pivotal positions offered in a state starting from scratch.

A Yugoslav delegation, conveying greetings from President Tito in January, 1972, exhorted Sheikh Mujib at that time to give those involved in the freedom struggle the central place in the Bangladesh administration. 'They may be inexperienced and make mistakes,' the Yugoslavs told Mujib, 'But their hearts are in the right place. They will learn quickly and they will push the country forwards.'

Mujib, however, did not see it that way. He was persuaded that the former East Pakistan bureaucrats, by their training and experience, were indispensable in the context of the overall shortage of qualified civil service alternatives. Another suggestion—and this appealed to Mujib's vanity as Bangabandhu—was to 'forgive and forget'. After all, it was argued, the government had to accommodate this sizeable group somewhere. So why not in the empty Bangladesh secretariat?

This was a woefully hollow argument. If, indeed, training and experience were the criteria for the appointment of Bangladesh's new senior bureaucrats, then the obvious place to look for them was the pool of talent made up of several hundred Bengali members of the elitist Civil Service of Pakistan. In talent, training and experience they were head and shoulders above most of the provincial officers. But in most cases their sin was to be in the wrong place—i.e. West Pakistan—when Bangladesh came into being in December 1971. The Bangabandhu charitable concept of 'forgive and forget', if at all

necessary since most of them had not collaborated, should have applied to them also. But it never did. The East Pakistan bureaucrats were in the right place at the right time and with the help of their relatives and Godfathers in the Awami League, grabbed all the best positions.

If the clock was turned back, it would not be Mujib alone who was guilty. Later Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed, who was put in power after Mujib's assassination, and General Ziaur Rahman who followed him, put the seal on it all. All this—resulting in corrupt, unresponsive and effete administration—had had the most disastrous consequences for Bangladesh.

Another blunder closely connected with Sheikh Mujib's misguided efforts in creating a civil service, was his public policy towards the freedom fighters. On the one hand he virtually excluded from the new Bangladesh secretariat all those FFs who were not already civil servants. On the other, he took pains to identify the FFs as a separate group—even more, a separate class—actively fanning, as the political gain required, their demands, hopes, ambitions and ultimately their frustrations.

A senior functionary of the Mujibnagar Government and a staunch supporter of Sheikh Mujib, estimated that there were approximately 300,000 Mukhti Bahini guerillas actively engaged against the Pakistani forces in 1971, both inside and outside Bangladesh. Nevertheless, in 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government, as a sop to public demand, issued as many as 1,100,000 certificates designating their holders as 'Freedom Fighters in the War of Liberation'. With each certificate went the implied entitlement to a host of privileges ranging from two years seniority in government service to preferential treatment in the matter of jobs, university admissions, cash grants and the hopes of a pension. The tragedy is that, like everything else, the FF certificates became instruments of political patronage and corruption. And not all the real Mukhti Bahini got them. Those who did, quickly discovered that the FF certificate served only a decorative purpose unless it was backed up by access to the patronage being funnelled through the Awami League old-boy network. Thus a whole new embittered and emotionally-hungry class was created, both in civilian life and the armed services. Over the years it became a key element in the continuing violence in the country.

This is particularly true of the armed services.

In December, 1971, on the attainment of independence all Bengali army, navy and air force personnel and members of the East Pakistan Rifles (now East Bengal Rifles) serving with the Mukhti Bahini were designated 'Freedom Fighters' and given two years seniority in service. For the first 18 months they served as the nucleus of the new Bangladesh defence forces until their less fortunate compatriots began to arrive. These were the 35,000 Bengali officers and troops, all professional soldiers, who had been posted in West Pakistan in 1969 and 1970 and had been stranded there when the Liberation War started in March, 1971. A handful of officers, among them Major Mohammad Abul Manzoor (later Major General Manzoor, the man behind the coup that resulted in President Ziaur Rahman's assassination in 1981) managed to escape across the Kashmir border into India to join up with the Mukhti Bahini. All the other officers and men stranded in West Pakistan were subjected to the humiliation of being disarmed by the Pakistanis and kept secluded and secure in well-guarded camps. Though never formally designated as such by the Pakistanis, they were in effect prisoners of war suffering all the attendant adversity, tension and trauma. Undoubtedly they suffered for the independence of Bangladesh.

Major Rafiq-ul-Islam, the distinguished freedom fighter who led the Bengali

troops of the East Pakistan Rifles in a courageous stand against the Pakistan army in Chittagong in March, 1971, underscores their trauma in his book, *A Tale of Millions*. 'The situation for the Bengali army personnel stranded in Pakistan was worse,' he said. 'They were driven out of their homes with their families, herded into concentration camps, mistreated, humiliated, abused and insulted, and some were even tortured beyond imagination. Medical facilities were withheld, other amenities virtually cut off. They were forced to sell their valuables, specially gold ornaments at throw-away prices, only to buy essential items at exorbitant prices. They were left with no option. It was almost impossible for them to escape. Yet they tried. Some succeeded; others were caught, taken prisoner, isolated and tortured. The attempts of the few symbolised the spirit of all of them. Their passage through the seemingly unending days of humiliation and agony was silent and memorable. Their sacrifice is equally great...'

All this was forgotten when the 35,000 Bengali officers and men were returned to Bangladesh in 1973 in an extended repatriation programme. Where the appellation 'FF' was considered a badge of valour, the word 'repatriate' became a term of derision for these unfortunate men. This was an unworthy slander of men whose only sin—if sin it can be called—was the accident of geography which found them against their volition on the wrong side of the sub-continent when Bangladesh was born.

Not only were the 'repatriates' superseded or passed over for promotion, but they were kept hanging around on the 'attached list' of the army. All their appointments were 'ad hoc'. As such for over two years and in some cases three, none of them could get their promotions, seniority and the regularisation of their service. Thus uncertainty about jobs, promotions and appointments undermined military morale terribly.

The differentiation between the FFs and 'repatriates' also politicised the defence forces and riddled them with factionalism and indiscipline. Ultimately it would lead to the killing of Sheikh Mujib, the Jail Four and President Ziaur Rahman. They were all 'FFs' and, ironically, it was the 'FFs' who were responsible for their slaying.

Towards the end of March, 1972, according to a hot rumour making the rounds in Dhaka, Mujib was grossly overworked and 'in the interests of health and administrative efficiency' was about to reappoint Tajuddin Ahmad as Prime Minister. Mujib, it was said, would step down to reorganise the Awami League and act the Father figure. When I asked Tajuddin about it, his answer was precise and telling: 'Someone is trying to cut my throat!' Mujib's own reaction to my inquiries was equally severe. 'Nonsense,' he told me, 'do they think I am not capable of running the government?' The rumour, which was obviously inspired by interested quarters, had the desired effect. Henceforth Mujib was all the more suspicious of Tajuddin and had him carefully watched.

Mujib was to soldier on in the hot seat and obviously he was not as happy as he pretended to be. All his life had been spent in the field, face-to-face with the people. Now he was isolated from them. The official restraints that were imposed on him, the demands on his time made by matters of state, and the high fence that surrounded him at all times were indeed galling. He would sometimes complain about them. But then this complex personality would also gloriously bask in the spotlight at the centre stage, savouring every nuance of the protocol and all the perks that went with it—his personal standard, the honour guard, the foreign dignitaries coming to court, the long black limousines. Once I rashly asked him why he didn't drive a smaller car, setting an