

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

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

### **‘Joy Bangla’**

50 years ago today, these final words in the momentous oration by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, already at that time honorifically referred to as “Bangabandhu” (The Father of the Nation), thundered out to a crowd of over one million supporters jammed into the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka.

Having struggled in the political and cultural realms for recognition of the integrity of Bengali culture, language and history for decades before, and at that moment being the presumptive Prime Minister of the whole of Pakistan, having decisively won the general election of December 1970, Bangabandhu cemented the justification for his title by this uplifting and empowering speech that set the course for the struggle for liberation and independence for the country that he had already dreamed of and had proposed to be called Bangladesh.

The speech was made in the midst of political turmoil and uncertainty, as the West Pakistan government postponed again and again the formation of the newly elected National Assembly, meanwhile pouring troops and arms into East Pakistan. In response, on the 1st of March Bangabandhu declared a province-wide general strike and program of non-cooperation for the following six days until he would announce his program to deal with the political crisis and chart the way forward.

And so over one million people poured into and around the race course in the centre of Dhaka. Journalists and technicians from the Dhaka Centre of Radio Pakistan, the Department of Films and Publications and the East Pakistan Gramophone Company were setting up their equipment. As Mujib arrived to address the meeting a dramatic event happened. The Pakistan Army took control of the radio station and ordered that no live broadcast of the speech could be made. All the Bengali staff walked out in protest and radio transmission ceased. Meanwhile at the race course the radio staff went ahead to record the speech in their professional recorders, as did the film team and the gramophone company staff.

The central government could not operate the radio without Bengali technicians and so entered into serious negotiations. The staff agreed to return and re-open the radio next morning on condition that they would resume with a broadcast of the speech delivered by Mujib. And that happened on the following morning. The gramophone company staff worked night and day to produce a 45rpm vinyl recording, presenting the first copy to Sheikh Mujib on his birthday, 17<sup>th</sup> March, before distributing it widely throughout the province.

So it was that through such courageous and determined commitment, the historic speech was able to reach the millions of people yearning to hear what Bangabandhu had to say .... His words were carried along the banks of the Padma, Meghna and Jamuna rivers, down to the sea at Chittagong, to the Sundarbans and up to the highland tracts, reverberating throughout the territory then known as East Pakistan, and from there across the world.

These recordings of Bangabandhu’s 7<sup>th</sup> of March speech were fortunately spared the ravages of the Liberation War, which tore through the territory over the next seven months. Not only were three million lives lost and millions more displaced, but many rare historic documents were also destroyed. But, almost miraculously, thanks to the devotion of their custodians, archivists and librarians, and the technicians who restored, re-mastered and digitised the

originals, their recordings, together with transcripts and translations of the speech and equipment, have survived intact for half a century, throughout Bangladesh's recent turbulent history. They include following:

- ✓ **Original unedited audio recording** on two magnetic tapes / Recorded & broadcast by Radio Pakistan / Bangladesh Betar (Government of East Pakistan) / Duration 19 min
- ✓ **Original 45 rpm record** / Recorded and edited by the East Pakistan Gramophone Company / Duration 15 min / Kept by the Liberation War Museum
- ✓ **Original 35 mm film footage** Positive & negative prints / Produced by the Chief of Films Division, Government of East Pakistan / Edited by the Department of Films & Publications in 1972 / Kept by the Bangladesh Film Archive
- ✓ **Digital version (2013)** made by the Bangladesh Film Archive
- ✓ **Coloured version (2014)** made by the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology
- ✓ **Transcripts and translations** (Bangla and English)

In 2017 these precious documents were nominated by Bangladesh, and successfully inscribed as Bangladesh's first and so far only item in UNESCO's Memory of the World International Register.

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The Memory of the World programme was established in 1972 to promote awareness and preservation of, and access to, the world's documentary heritage. One of its main activities has been the establishment of international, regional and national registers of significant documents. I was privileged to be one of the members of the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World in 2017 and thus able to give my voice and vote enthusiastically in support of the nomination by Bangladesh of *The historic 7<sup>th</sup> March speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – 1971*.

Inscription of the speech was not necessarily a foregone conclusion. Although the Memory of the World definition of a document goes well beyond books and manuscripts to include all forms in which text or signs are recorded and transmitted, until today the registers include very few audio-visual items. The 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech is one of only three radio broadcasts on the International Register (the others being *The Archives of the Korean Broadcasting Service Special Live Broadcast "Finding Dispersed Families"* (1983) and the *Radio Broadcast of Philippines People's Power* (1986)). Furthermore, there has been a reluctance to include documents considered to be "Declarations of Independence" in the International Register, given that almost all countries have such a founding document that they consider to be special. Fortunately, the view prevailed in the International Advisory Committee that the 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech was a highly significant document, not only for the people of Bangladesh, but for humanity as a whole. The speech was considered to have had a huge historical impact; to be a model of public speech art excellence; and to represent a turning point in the history of Bangladesh: the creation of an independent state, which has changed the regional boundaries. The speech reveals the charismatic qualities of a man able to catch and express the aspirations of the people. The social and human values conveyed are inspiring for other countries where ethnic, religious, cultural diversity is not taken into account.

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May I urge those joining in today's celebration to consider carefully what other documents could be nominated by Bangladesh for the international, regional or national registers depending on the geographic extent of their significance – they may be more sound or film recordings, ancient or modern manuscripts, palimpsest, maps, books, oral history or any other forms.

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The 7 March Speech played a pivotal role in galvanizing the population to resist. But Bangladesh was born. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself was arrested and bundled away to jail in West Pakistan for nine months, but the people responded in overwhelming support and determination to gain independence. A new flag was hastily sewn in homes and workshops and flown proudly, the MukhtiBahini fighting forces were also hastily assembled. And, with the strong diplomatic and military support from India, they were able to drive out the occupying troops from West Pakistan. The price paid for this victory was enormous and is still being paid fifty years later by the people of Bangladesh.

Bangabandhu went on to become the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh and is still remembered and honoured until today. Next week will mark the conclusion of the year-long celebrations of his birth on 17 March 1921, of which today's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his finest speech is but one part.

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In concluding my remarks today, I wish to highlight some of the features that Cambodia, my second home, a country of which I am proud to have been accepted as a citizen, shares with Bangladesh, and why it seems so natural for me to be speaking to you today as part of this 7 March Golden Anniversary.

Our two countries both have long and rich cultural heritage, which is kept alive today in music and dance. While you have your ideal Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal), Cambodia considers itself to be the historical location of the SovannaPhum (Land of Gold), as mentioned in a stone inscription from 633, found 25 years ago in Kampong Speu province, and now held in the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

And both countries emerged from the deltas of mighty river systems, and have large proportions of their land annually submerged under rising water during the south-west monsoon. So prevalent is this feature, that Cambodia is traditionally referred to as “tekdae Kampuchea” (land and water of Cambodia), and the founding myths and vibrant local traditions continue to give great veneration to water, which plays a significant part in many ceremonies. Although Cambodia is spared the cyclones which so often wreak havoc in Bangladesh, both countries are facing a common threat as both are among those considered to be most at risk as we face the ever-growing reality of climate change.

Finally, Cambodia and Bangladesh share tragic recent histories of colonialism and genocide. The two genocidal tragedies took place at almost the very same time, in the 1970s; almost the same number of people (perhaps 3 million in each country) perished. Both governments that emerged from these genocides were denied recognition, ostracised and boycotted by the majority of the so-called “international community” in a program of “punishing the poor”. With suffering and loss still very raw and present in our societies, both have struggled to rebuild and move forward, while not forgetting the past. We both have struggled to seek justice, and after many years of overcoming obstacles to that course, in the early 2000s established courts for the crimes committed (albeit in different forms as the International

Criminal Tribunal in Bangladesh and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia). Both have made valiant efforts to document the crimes, to preserve sites and to memorialise the victims, and survivors of events that took place.

Indeed, it is our shared efforts in this latter endeavour that has brought me to be with you today. It has been my honour to work closely with the Liberation War Museum since 2008, and with its Center for the Study of Genocide and Justice. Only this last week I was involved in bringing Cambodian musicians together to express solidarity with Bangladesh, recording a performance to be part of your forthcoming 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration of the Bangladesh Genocide.

I salute those in both countries, and around the world, who have struggled and sacrificed in the cause of emancipation and independence, against racial, ethnic, national, religious, political, social and cultural persecution.

Joy Bangla!

Joy Bangabandhu!