Bangabandhu and Visions of Bangladesh

This is the complete text of the "Bangabandhu Birth Centenary Talk" by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, delivered online on 27 January 2021. The event was organised by the LSE South Asia Centre as part of "Mujib 100"celebrations to mark the centenary of Sheikh Mujibur's Rahman's birth centenary in 2019-20, in collaboration with the Bangladesh High Commission in London. A video-recording of the talk is available here.

In plain Bengali, "Bangabandhu" means "friend of Bengal". Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was, of course, incomparably more than that. He was the great political leader of Bangladesh, the founder of the idea of an independent Bangladesh, the biggest influence on the lives of Bangladeshis, the most admired person in Bengal, and as has been noted again and again, he can be rightly seen as the "father of the nation" in Bangladesh. Being a friend of Bangladesh, or Bangabandhu, is really a very modest way of describing Mujibur Rahman. The fact that he did not ask for a more grand designation tells us something really important about him. He did not seek nominal glory — people admired him instinctively.

I am thrilled that I have been given the opportunity of remembering him during the celebrations of the centenary of his birth. Other than paying tribute to this wonderful human being and the great leader that he was, I want to say a few words on why his ideas remain so very important today. Bangabandhu has been taken from us, but no one can rob us of his clear-headed visions, which, I will argue, can make a real difference to the lives we can lead. The subcontinent — India included — is going through a challenging period of ideological confusion right now, and we have reason to turn to Bangabandhu for guidance as well as inspiration. Among the many distinct ways in which Sheikh Mujib's thoughts and analyses have powerful relevance today, let me choose a short-list of a few.

First, Sheikh Mujib was one of the clearest exponents of *secularism,* from which all countries can learn. This included India, the largest country in the subcontinent, which has, right now, a particular need to learn from Bangabandhu's insights. However, looking more broadly, all the countries in the subcontinent need Bangabandhu's ideas. Bangladesh itself has gone through ups and downs on secularism, but since Bangabandhu spoke very clearly on what kind of a Bangladesh he wanted, we can easily read from his exposition what form he would have liked to have given to secularism (for an illuminating discussion of Bangabandhu's analysis of secularism, see Rounaq Jahan, 'Bangabandhu's Vision of Secularism for Bangladesh', Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 3 January 2021).

I would like to emphasise here that the association between secularism and human freedom had an inspirational role for Sheikh Mujib. There is one way of looking at secularism, which is often used in Europe, that includes a general hostility to religion, and which sees a secular state as one which never encourages — or helps — any kind of religious activity. The United States has tried this kind of secularism intermittently, but God and Christianity are so strong in most American minds that secularism in this form is a bit of a non-starter in the USA. The French do a better job of secularism in the sense of shunning religious practice of any kind, but even that is far from pure as far as religion-avoiding secularism goes. In Bangabandhu's clear-headed exposition, secularism did not mean that people should not have religious freedom, which is an important kind of freedom that people with religious convictions would surely tend to value.

For these reasons, Mujib did not see any great merit in this anti-religious way of thinking of secularism. Nor did he find any particular point in avoiding religious practice and sacrificing religious freedom to "become secular". In November 1972 in Dacca (now Dhaka), when the Constitution of a new secular democracy was being adopted in the Bangladeshi parliament, Mujib spoke on what he was really seeking in his search for the important value of secularism:

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"We will not stop practice of religion. …Muslims will practice their religion. …Hindus will practice their religion. …Buddhists will practice their religion. …Christians will practice their religion. …We will only object to political use of religion."

Religious freedom is held high in this view, and what is negated is the political use — and indeed political exploitation — of religion. It is a freedom-centred view, and what the state is being asked to do is not to interfere in people's practice of their respective religions. Indeed, we should go further and help people to enjoy the freedom of practice of the religion of their choice, and do what we can to stop the interference of others in someone else's religious practice. The state can be useful there.

I am sad to have to say that these principles have recently taken quite a bit of beating in India. Different religions are sometimes treated asymmetrically, with the Hindutva-leaning central government giving special privileges, even in matters of citizenship, to its favoured religious group. Several states within India have prohibited the consumption of particular types of food (for example, beef) by members of one community (for example, Muslims) because of the disapproval of another religious community (particularly ritualistic Hindus). Similarly, inter-religious marriages have been put under restriction — and sometimes even prohibition — despite there being no scriptural difficulty with such weddings under the religions chosen by the couples who want to marry. Also, stories of forcible religious conversion of the bride are often repeated, but as court cases have tended to show, these accusations are often hard to sustain with proper evidence.

The subject of secularism was discussed with clarity by the Mughal Emperor Akbar towards the end of the sixteenth century. He concluded that there should not be any ban on religious practice freely chosen by people. The states could help in preserving this freedom, but no religion should enjoy privileges not shared by other religions. We see two principles of secularism here — respectively (1) in the form of there being "no asymmetry" in the treatment of different religions by the state (emphasised by Akbar); and (2) in the form of "no political use of religion" (on which Bangbandhu focused). They are not exactly the same principle. But their violation would go against people's religious freedom in similar ways, since the political use of religion tends typically for the purpose of favouring one religion over another. This can be easily illustrated with recent violations of secularism in India, involving political use of religion in ways that favour one religion over another.

A good understanding of secularism, as explained by Sheikh Mujib — and by Akbar — is particularly important right now in many countries. This applies not only in India, but also in other countries across the world. They are sometimes relevant to political discussions also in the United States and Europe that relate to discrimination in related fields, such as racial and ethnic asymmetry. In the subcontinent, they have often touched on issues that contemporary debates and agitations in Pakistan and Sri Lanka have sharply brought out.

The Indian situation is rather more precarious in the historical perspective, since India was much closer to a practicing secular democracy for many decades until relatively recently. The issue has sharply arisen in the context of impending elections in some state assemblies, for example in West Bengal for elections due to be held in April-May this year. The central issues of secularism, particularly in the form in which Bangabandhu has explained the basic requirements, demand discussion right now, since the records of different political parties in conforming to — and violating — the principles of secularism are strongly involved in some of the major electoral battles. Bangabandhu's powerful diagnostic criterion about not making political use of religion has very extensive relevance today. Since it is important for the world — not just for Bengal — Bangabandhu can also be seen as "Bishwabandhu", "friend of the world".

Not only did Sheikh Mujib see secularism in the light of advancing freedom, his general interest in the importance of freedom was very strong and steady. Indeed, the central concern about the use of mother tongue, in the fight for which Bangabandhu provided leadership, related to freedom, and so does the conception of a Bengali nation linked closely with the freedom to use people's own language.

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This too has been a central question in many subcontinental discussions, including the respective importance given to Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka. It is possible that Sri Lanka could have escaped a war and much bloodshed had the political leadership of the country paid more attention to Sheikh Mujib's analysis of the language issue, and understood the need for making room for people's own mother language. The wisdom of Bangabandhu's social analysis of language use had application far beyond Bengal.

By giving the status of national language to all the major languages in India, some serious problems were surely avoided quite early in India. This constitutional decision was taken in India before Sheikh Mujib had become a major political leader, but some of his concerns still apply. While the status of being a national language gives each major language of India an important standing, there are asymmetries — some of which may be inescapable — between the official languages in the form of Hindi and English and the other major Indian languages. There are contrasts of privileges between those whose mother tongue is Hindi (and in some cases, English), on one side, and other Indians without that convenience. The problem of equity about official use of some language rather than another has to be dealt with pragmatically, but the possible inequality may deserve more attention than it tends to get.

This may be, to some extent, an issue in West Bengal as well, but it is a much bigger concern in the southern states in India, with languages originating mainly from old Tamil, rather than Sanskrit. At the risk of slight oversimplification, it can be said that Sheikh Mujib's priority was always on freedom, and the distinct issues of status, standing, official use and medium of instruction have to be judged in that broad light.

Before ending my presentation, I would like to say a few words on Bangabandhu's concern about advancing equity. In seeking separation and independence from undivided Pakistan, the egalitarian concerns played a significant role in the thinking of the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib. In the campaign speeches for the crucially important 1970 general elections, Bangabandhu did not hesitate to place the issue of equity between the different religious communities in front of the heterogeneous voting public. On grounds of the need for equity between Muslims and Hindus, he insisted on the principle that "the people of the minority community are entitled to enjoy equal rights and opportunities like any other citizen."

Despite the massive majority of Muslims in East Pakistan, the egalitarian sentiment seeking justice for the minority community did not interfere with Awami League's success, because of Bangabandhu's persuasive advocacy (the Awami League got 167 out of the 169 seats allocated to East Pakistan in the National Assembly in the elections in 1970). The effectiveness of cogent reasoning for a just cause is well illustrated by many episodes in Sheikh Mujib's life and politics. There is a lesson there too.

I end, finally, with a point of history. Bangabandhu has frequently pointed to the relation of his moral principles with traditional values in Bengal. Do Bangabandhu's egalitarian concerns have any noticeable historical link? The answer may well be: yes, they do. We can see that, for example, in the poetry, stretching back a long time, of socially conscious poets or bards. This is particularly true of the writings of poets like Kazi Nazrul Islam, but even the earliest Bengali poetry give indications in that direction.

The earliest Bengali poets writing in an ancient form of Bengali often revealed their concern for equity. Let me give an example. The Buddhist poet Siddhacharja Bhusuku reflects in a *Charjapad* in early 10th century Bengali about his river journey to east Bengal. On the way east, various things happens to him, including being robbed by pirates (he says he will not weep for it) and his getting married to a woman of the lowest strata in the society — a woman of the Chandal caste (he is thrilled by it). So Siddhacharja offered the following poem — a thousand years ago — praising equity, the love for which he attributes to Bengali culture:

I have steered the thunder-boat along the course of Padda.

The pirates have robbed me of my misery.

Bhusuku, today you have become a true "Bangalee"

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Having taken a Chandal woman as your wife.

Being a Bangalee did not mean in those days a resident of anywhere in Bengal, but particularly of Dhaka and Faridpur. However, that was still a big part of Bengal, and we can see how "true Bangalees" — and their love of equity — were viewed a millennium ago.

As it happens, Bangabandhu was born in Tungipara in the Dhaka-Faridpur region. Since I am from Dhaka as well, I can celebrate too. I can cultivate my courage, before ending this talk, and greet an exceptional neighbour I was fortunate to have whose great ideas and leadership have changed the world.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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