Independence, Freedom, Liberation
The Promise of Bangladesh's Founding

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The idea of *swadhinata* (which translates as both freedom and independence), along with a novel conception of liberation (mukti), animated the founding discourse of Bangladesh in 1971. This paper explores how these ideas, and their longer histories, jostled together to shape the promise of Bangladesh's founding. It also reflects on how the conflictual promise of 1971 underwrote the political history of post-independence Bangladesh.

The founding of Bangladesh in 1971 came trailing off the dissipating cloud of decolonisation on the Indian subcontinent. The emergence of Bangladesh defied the calculus of political expectations, both nationally and internationally. No political actors, including those who wanted to sever ties with the Pakistan state on the eve of the military crackdown, were quite ready for the cataclysmic pace at which the event would unfold. Still, as is the case with modern political foundings, there would be no dearth of attempts to bestow a logic of necessity onto the contingent trajectory of 1971. Hannah Arendt (1963: 28) insightfully observed that the revolutionary foundings of the modern era were rooted in the "notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold." Yet, having bent the course of political time, founding events tend to be shrouded in the narratives of inevitability; the effect generates its own cause. This has more or less been the story of Bangladesh's founding. It is conveniently rendered as a "homecoming" of Bengali Muslims after the supposedly misguided adventure of Pakistan or as a "restoration" of the original programme of the Lahore Resolution (Ahmad 1975). Tempting as it might be to merely focus on unmasking those teleological narratives, they reveal something important about the extraordinary hold of the event in the polity that came to be fashioned in its wake. No past or possible futures of Bengali Muslims would be narratable again without being pulled into the vortex of 1971.

The Location of Bangladesh's Founding

The founding of Bangladesh occupied a liminal zone between postcolonial foundings and secessions. To be sure, the purchase of the global anti-colonial discourse in the 1960s East Pakistan was evident, not to mention the durable legacy of the Indian anti-colonial movement. On 24 February 1971, approximately a month before "Operation Searchlight," Sheikh Mujibur Rahman stated in a press conference that the people of the eastern wing of Pakistan "no longer want to live in a colony [upanibesh]." Mujib declared that the Awami League—which had won the 1970 general election in a landslide but had not been allowed to take office—only "acknowledges the power of the people." Setting his party's agenda against the colonial spectre, he further claimed that their only goal was to be able to live as a "free [swadhin] citizen in a free country" (Rahman 2008: 145–49).[1]

However, as Faisal Devji (2021) reminds us in his paper for this issue, Bangladesh came into being by breaking away

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from another postcolonial state. In fact, the major political actors of Bangladesh's independence movement were active participants in the Pakistan movement in the 1940s. Caught in the middle of the Cold War and the two postcolonial states vying for regional hegemony, the international context of the Bangladesh war was quite different from the standard set of constraints faced by classic postcolonial foundings (Bass 2013; Raghavan 2013). These divergences from the established anti-colonial tradition meant that the founding of Bangladesh ran the risk of being defined by the less inspiring tradition of secessions and geopolitical warfare. Within Bangladesh, on the contrary, the event is usually seen as a narrative of heroic overcoming, one that often re-enacts the founding trope of affirming "reverential self-regard" (Getachew 2021; Frank 2021). The radical mismatch between the domestic and international images of Bangladesh's founding is symptomatic of its uncertain location in 20th-century narratives of independence and postcolonial foundings.

The Bengali Muslim conception of Pakistan in the 1940s—especially that of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—thematised it as a prefigurative critique of the postcolonial. The establishment of separate state(s) for the Muslim peoples of India, Mujib hoped, would allow them to leap over the sectarian conflict that would overwhelm an undivided, postcolonial India. However, the specific political form that the state of Pakistan took soon led Mujib to return to the language of the anti-colonial era. This irony of history notwithstanding, Mujib and his colleagues had to do more than just return to the anti-colonial tradition which they once found inadequate. In seeking to transform a demographic (that is, Bengali Muslims) into the *demos*, the founding of Bangladesh amounted to an attempt to break free of the logic of two past (and different) partitions—the partition of Bengal in 1905 and that of India in 1947.

Central to all this was the word—and the idea—called *swadhinata*. Swadhinata, which translates as both freedom and independence, had politically impeccable, if theoretically ambiguous, anti-colonial credentials. Given its wider connotations pertaining to political freedom, the growing usages of the word in the 1960s did not necessarily imply a demand for full-fledged independence. At the same time, the historical and conceptual overlaps between the word swadhinata and idea of independence were unmistakable. In the years leading to the tense days of March, and especially in his justly famous speech of 7 March 1971, Mujib would fully exploit the semantic ambiguity of swadhinata. He demanded the transfer of power to the Awami League without explicitly disavowing the possibility of a declaration of independence. The negotiation between the two prongs of the idea of swadhinata was mediated by another, newer political term in the South Asian context: liberation or mukti. Drawn from the repertoire of the Algerian and Vietnamese struggles, the language of liberation helped displace, albeit momentarily, a problem constitutive of the Bengali history of the word swadhinata: the non-identity of political freedom and independence.

Navigating between the overlapping yet distinct meanings of freedom, independence, and liberation, the founders of Bangladesh construed "swadhinata" as the promise of simultaneous emancipation from political "slavery" (Rahman 2008: 151) and the socio-economic underdevelopment of their people. The fault line of such an overdetermined idea of swadhinata would soon be manifested after the emergence of Bangladesh. As independence turned into reality, the ineffable investment of political hope in freedom quickly split between the political and the social. In a way, this was the restaging of an older drama that played out variously across the postcolonial world. There would be a range of efforts in the 1972 Constituent Assembly to stabilise its meaning. Mujib declared in the assembly—most of his allies and even critics agreed—that with the acquisition of political freedom, the focus must now turn to economic freedom. The former would be futile without the latter. The tragedy of this split was not so much in the fact that the social was prioritised but rather in the simultaneous bracketing of the question of political freedom (which, after all, animated the struggle for independence). That precious thing called political freedom, once acquired, appeared to be dispensable. The lack of attention given to the already exceedingly difficult project of institutionalising political freedom also meant the absence of meaningful safeguards against the instrumentalisation of the social question (pertaining to the problems of poverty and underdevelopment). The post-1971 history of Bangladesh—from dictatorial regimes to its status as a successful laboratory of development (Hossain 2017)—cannot entirely be separated from the conflictual promise of its founding. Nor is it reducible to an accounting of such successes and failures. But what exactly was this promise? This is the question I take up in this paper.

Colonial History of Swadhinata

The idea of swadhinata had a rich history dating back to the 19th century. By the second half of the 19th century, the Bengali literary world was awash with this alluring Sanskrit neologism; its rise had much to do with the contemporary fascination with the idea of liberty (Kaviraj 2011). Quite early on, the word swadhinata—which etymologically means "to be subject to one's own self"—found itself at the crossroads between the humiliation of imperial subjection and the promise of freedom. The word itself was at the centre of a set of newly articulable questions: Was Bengal (or India for that matter) ever free? What are the conditions of freedom? What led to the British subjection of India? Yet, even as the word facilitated a set of new debates, its meaning remained rather opaque. A young Rabindranath Tagore, thoroughly unimpressed by the imitative tendencies of his contemporaries, would observe in the late 1870s:

> In recent times, a word called swadhinata has entered Bengali literature. But this word is not an inherited property of our literature. It is not that an idea called swadhinata was first born in our hearts and then we named it so accordingly. We have rather suddenly picked up the word and have been worshipping it as though it is a substance.

Tagore ultimately compared the Bengali obsession with the word swadhinata to a certain group of peasants from southern India who, upon receiving steam engines from Europe,

decided to deify and worship the magical machines rather than use them (Tagore 2000: 369).

The intellectual dispute over the meaning of swadhinata was triggered by the poet Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's 1858 historical romance *Padmini Upakhyan* (Narrative of Padmini). For his 19th-century retelling of Malik Muhammad Jayasi's 16th-century epic, Bandyopadhyay relied on James Tod's popular anthology *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han*. Much like Tod, Bandyopadhyay's narrative embraced the trope of an originary Hindu–Muslim rivalry (Sreenivasan 2007). However, Bandyopadhyay narrative was also distinctive in its recasting of the clash between Alauddin Khalji and his Hindu adversaries in terms of liberty. He was first drawn to the question of liberty after a heated debate with a "gentleman" Bengali (babu) in the early 1850s regarding whether a subject people such as the Bengalis could write great poetry. The English-educated babu—Kailashcandra Basu—argued in a literary meeting in Kolkata that the poverty of the literary oeuvre of Bengal was unsurprising because the inspiration for great literature is tied up with the experience of liberty. Bandyopadhyay initially wrote an essay contesting this argument but later decided to write an epic poem to disprove Basu's claim. The portion of the poem that became widely popular concerned the conquest of Chittor. Specifically, Bandyopadhyay's claim that the defeat of the Hindu king amounted to a loss of the liberty (swadhinata) of the subject people, and not simply of the kingdom itself, departed from the traditional, ruler-centric understanding of conquest (Bandyopadhyay 1905). In the process, Bandyopadhyay also collectivised the idea of liberty. On this new view, the liberty of a people is at stake in the question regarding whether the ruler belonged to the same community as the ruled.

Bandyopadhyay's literary definition of swadhinata received sharp criticism from his contemporaries. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's perceptive 1873 essay—"The Liberty and Subjection of India"—was perhaps the most pointed answer to this increasingly ascendant view of liberty. The essay explored the meaning of swadhinata through a comparative study of the question of liberty in ancient and modern India. Like Tagore later, Bankim attributed the contemporary fascination with the idea of swadhinata to the Bengali encounter with European knowledge. Bankim argued that his contemporaries had conflated liberty with independence. He proposed that the word swadhinata should only be used in reference to liberty, whereas a different word—*swatantra*—should be reserved for independence. Bankim also refused to define independence on the basis of the racial or religious identity of the ruler; he instead suggested that a country could be considered independent if the throne of the ruler was based in its territory. On the other hand, swadhinata or liberty essentially means the legal equality of the citizens, especially between the ruling and ruled races. By this definition, British India was neither free nor independent. But Bankim did not find a better alternative in ancient India: while the ancient Indian polities could be considered independent, the legal inequality between different castes and groups rendered them unfree (Chattopadhyay 1954).

Bankim's keen intervention into the analytical debate over the meaning of swadhinata could not, however, resolve another emerging bifurcation of the idea between the social and the political. The Brahmo Samaj leader Keshub Chandra Sen's 1873 essay—published under the suggestive title "Are we Free? [*Amra ki Swadhin*?]"—marked an early attempt to grapple with this new cleavage. Sen, too, dismissed the premises of Bandyopadhyay's view of swadhinata. The identity of the ruler, he noted, had no bearing on the liberty of the subjects. The occasion for Sen's intervention, however, was the Bengal Lieutenant Governor George Campbell's observation that while Indians were not politically free under the British rule, they were nevertheless able to enjoy "social freedom" (*samajik swadhinata*). Campbell's evidence for this claim was rather dubious. He invoked the recent institution of municipal self-government as evidence for the flourishing of social freedom in Bengal. Sen did not contest Campbell's conception of the social, which the Brahmo Samaj historically understood with reference to the reform of gendered and moral practices of Indians. He focused instead on the absence of any decision-making power on the part of the taxpayers who constituted and financed the municipalities, thereby calling into question the thin line that seemingly separated social and political freedom. Sen ultimately concluded that Indian subjects were as unfree in the British era as they had been before.

Already by the 1870s, the conceptual parameters of swadhinata were in place. This tradition of theorising swadhinata through the fraught relationship between liberty and independence would flow in a steady stream of Bengali, and broader Indian, political reflections until the end of British rule and beyond. In the intervening years, the major transformation came to be a renewed conceptualisation of the social. The gendered question of "social reform" (Sinha 1995)—which shaped the original Indian meaning of the social—slowly gave in to a caste- and economy-centric reconfiguration of the social question. When Bengali Muslims made their presence felt on the national political scene in the wake of the Swadeshi movement, their political claims, too, found a place in the broader terrain of the social. From demands for an increased share in administrative employment to English education, early 20th-century Bengali Muslim politics uneasily navigated the community's twofold position—as the numerical majority and a social "minority" in Bengal. Although Bengali Muslims were not absent in anti-British agitations, the nagging doubt about the pursuit of political sovereignty while remaining socially backward (and thus unfree) was not insignificant. In a 20th-century twist, postcolonial independence would appear to be inseparable from the perpetuation of unfreedom for the minority.

The dilemma of the Bengali Muslim reckoning with swadhinata is perhaps best captured in a curious passage in Mujib's unfinished memoir (it is worth noting that he wrote this in the late 1960s, before the idea of Bangladesh had crystallised). Revisiting the eventful days of the Quit India movement and World War II, Mujib candidly admitted his delight at the initial struggles of Britain in the war. When Subhas Chandra Bose's Azad Hind Fauj took up arms against

the British, Mujib found himself drawn to the possibility of a Bose-led war for independence. Yet, Mujib was immediately consumed by the thought that if Bose returned to India to hasten the arrival of independence, this would undermine the mobilisation for Pakistan. He was simultaneously convinced that Bose would not be driven by sectarian interests and that Indian Muslims would have no future in an independent India. Mujib, thus, found that swadhinata (understood as independence) and Pakistan were two mutually exclusive possibilities in the 1940s India (Rahman 2012: 35–36). Mujib, of course, was not incorrect in assuming that Pakistan was not so much about ousting the British to reclaim a given territory but rather about founding a new state beyond the historic line of dispute between the imperial and anti-colonial claimants (Devji 2013). The Pakistan project appeared to be a political separation necessary for the institution of peace between the vying Hindu and Muslim communities (Kapila 2019). Mujib also saw the Pakistan movement as an aspiration to resist the majoritarian dangers of the postcolonial with another majoritarianism (Chakrabarty 2018)—an exit from the "infinite" conflict of an undivided, postcolonial India. In resolving the question of group conflict, Mujib hoped that the Pakistan project would allow for the unimpeded advancement of Bengali Muslims. Like most attempts to foretell the course of history, this wish to bypass the postcolonial for what almost resembled a post-political utopia turned out to be a fateful pact with the future. In the span of a few years, Mujib and his colleagues would find themselves reaching out for what they only recently deemed to be the retired discourses of the anti-colonial era.

Between Independence and Liberation

Mujib's historic speech on 7 March 1971 occupies the ground zero of Bangladesh's political history. The immediate context of the speech was the political crisis that enveloped Pakistan after the 1970 general election, which the Mujib-led Awami League comprehensively won, taking all but two of East Pakistan's allotted 169 seats. The refusal of Yahya Khan's military regime to hand over power to the Awami League inflamed the already tense political situation in the eastern wing. When a last-ditch roundtable meeting between Mujib and Khan failed, Dhaka was on the brink of an explosion. Amid the political uncertainty, Mujib was scheduled to speak and dictate the next course of action. Barely 19-minutes long and delivered in front of a packed crowd, the speech would go on to become the stuff of legend. It skilfully manoeuvred the fraught, treasonous space, between disavowing the Pakistan state and proclaiming the arrival of a new one, by not fully committing to either. In a way, the speech was only a declaration of independence for those who wanted to hear it.

There have been plenty of debates over the past 50 years about the exact intention of the speech from the interpretive disagreement regarding whether it constituted a declaration of independence to a variety of factual disputes. A consummate politician, Mujib fully understood the political power of rhetoric. He was alive to the point that political claims are rhetorically constructed and that they create, rather than merely reflect, political realities. His political rise from a student leader in the British era to the helm of the Awami League also owed a great deal to his dogged insistence on the public nature of political action (Rahman 2012: 133–34). Mujib's seemingly uncritical insistence on always acting in the public and his refusal to partake in secret resistances had the added virtue of avoiding what one might call an underground theory of power (which dominated political imagination in the 1960s South Asia). He took political power to be a visible entity and thus political action to be an essentially public performance.

Where did Pakistan fit into all of this? Mujib followed the emerging consensus of the East Bengal intellectual scene—that the relationship between the two wings of Pakistan was essentially a colonial one. Yet, the postcolonial state of Pakistan could not be readily made commensurable to European empires. Nor could Mujib—and the leaders of the Awami League—easily disavow that it was a state they had themselves helped bring into being. Mujib's default narrative was to portray Pakistan as a promise unfulfilled. As noted earlier in the paper, he understood the Pakistan project to be an escape from the political conflict of India so that the Muslims of the subcontinent could prioritise social and economic development (Rahman 2012: 234). He stressed the plurality of Muslim peoples of India; the Lahore Resolution of 1940, he argued more than once, proposed the formation of multiple autonomous states (Rahman 2012: 52). Indeed, Mujib steered clear of the culturalist argument for Pakistan that an influential section of Bengali Muslim intellectuals had marshalled (Sartori 2005). Still, there was something baffling about the idea that the Pakistan project—a product of the anxiety over the boundary of Indian peoplehood—could be extricated from its pan-Indian-Muslim dimension.

Yet, Mujib did not see would-be Bangladesh as a mere correction of the Pakistan project. If the Pakistan moment was marked by claims of social advancement for Bengali Muslims, the Bangladesh moment was to be the transformation of the sociologically marked category of East Bengali or Bengali Muslim into the fully abstract category of the people (janagan). It was at once a story of oppression and heroism: one could hear nothing but the "wailing of the dying people" in the past two decades (Rahman 2008: 151). Nevertheless, the brutalisation of the insurrectionary masses was not entirely a story of victimhood. For Mujib, East Bengalis had chosen to sacrifice themselves for their right to be a sovereign people (Sofa 2002: 229–32). Mujib was tapping into the full repertoire of popular sovereignty as a resistance narrative: the people were at once the victims and agents of their history. The tragedy of Pakistan was the denial of the political claims of Bengalis as a people. Mujib attributed all the agential capacity for resistance to the people. After the Yahya Khan regime's blatant disregard for the popular mandate, Mujib observed, "the people had responded … They took over the streets on their own will" (Rahman 2008: 152). By the early months of 1971, Mujib began to ground the demands of East Pakistan in the sheer authoritative claims of its people. From a mere demographic, Bengali Muslims—and East Bengalis as a whole—stood transformed into the demos. This was the Bangabandhu's most vital contribution to the founding of Bangladesh.

This move was fundamentally enabled by the discourse of liberation (mukti) flourishing in the 1960s. The Indian anti-colonial movement had historically framed the question of post-imperial future in terms of swadhinata, *azadi*, and so on, but the pursuit of independence had never quite invoked the sense of liberation. This was partly because of the deep hold of the argument that the subjection of India owed as much to its own underdevelopment as the might of the British. As we have seen with Bankim and his contemporaries, independence as mere liberation would be incomprehensible to them. The profound hold of the developmental framework meant that the overcoming of imperial rule remained substantively different from the problem of institutionalising freedom.

By the 1960s, however, the right to self-determination (*atma-niyantran*) had become an immediately claimable right for those who saw themselves as a people. With the moral legitimacy and progressive claims of European empires in tatters post-World War II, the occupation of one country by another now lacked the once ubiquitous developmentalist signification. In the shadow of Algeria and Vietnam, the politically uneven relationship between the two wings of Pakistan could now be seen as a relationship of usurpation. Independence now did not simply mean territorial sovereignty or the assertion of political freedom but also the liberation of the people from an unjust occupation. Swadhinata thus acquired another meaning, that of liberation or mukti. Unlike the 19th-century concoction of swadhinata, mukti, of course, is a word with deep roots in Indian philosophy, with origins in the idea of moksha (Kaviraj 2011). The military crackdown on East Pakistan, which "compressed" and dramatically redrew the lines of political loyalty (Newbold 2021), turned "mukti" into the rallying cry of East Bengali resistance. Indeed, the growing overlap of swadhinata and mukti was aptly captured in the final sentence of Mujib's iconic speech: "the struggle this time, is the struggle for our liberation (mukti); the struggle this time, is the struggle for our freedom (swadhinata)" (Rahman 2008: 153). To be independent was to be liberated. But, as we shall see, it was still not enough to be free.

Postcolonial Freedom: Social and Political

Writing on the Indian Constituent Assembly debates, political theorist Uday Mehta (2010) observed, in an Arendtian vein, that the entanglement of the question of political power with the social question rendered the former absolutist and undermined the necessity of securing the conditions of "public freedom." The Indian Constituent Assembly deliberated for over three years,

but, as Mehta rightly notes, the concerns of social upliftment and national unity dwarfed the seemingly "subsidiary concern" of political freedom. The core of Mehta's salutary insight is no less true for the larger postcolonial world beyond India. That the conception of political power—as a means to the end—in addressing the social question has a corrosive effect on the autonomy of the political is evident in the unfinished history of postcolonial democracy.

The achievement of independence immediately generated an emptiness at the heart of the idea of swadhinata in independent Bangladesh. The debates in the Bangladesh Constituent Assembly reveal a set of attempts to infuse the idea of swadhinata with new meaning. Bangladesh's Constituent Assembly was haphazardly put together in early 1972. Given that it was composed of elected representatives of the 1970 Pakistan general and provincial election (which, as I noted earlier, the Awami League swept), it lacked the political diversity that one might expect in a constituent assembly. Nevertheless, the discussion was lively and animated, not least because of the crucial interventions by the two non-Awami League members of the assembly. Having met only a few months after the end of the war, the joy of acquiring the prized possession of independence was rather palpable. But the ensuing deliberation also returned again and again to the fraught question: Now that independence has been acquired, what has become of the larger question of freedom (swadhinata)? Attempts to trace the origins of the political entity called Bangladesh further back in time—which, at any rate, is how modern foundings declare their arrival—had now commenced; there appeared to be a continuous line between the disparate protests and resistances of the Pakistan and British eras and the event of 1971. One member of the assembly declared that the constitution to be put into effect was as old as that of many older nations, for it distills the expressions of popular will during the long course of the struggle for independence (Halim 2014: 94).

Though the assembly members reminded each other of the privilege of drafting a constitution for the young polity, there was also the shared understanding that a new constitution was not going to resolve the pre-eminent question of the social. A constitution could only regulate and order political procedures, whereas the immediate task appeared to be that of generating substantive conditions of freedom. A week after the new constitution came into effect, Mujib—now the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh—noted that "there is no meaning to political freedom (swadhinata) without economic freedom. If the basic wants of the working people are not fulfilled, the freedom we have acquired with so much sacrifice would prove to be futile" (Rahman 2008: 225). As soon as it was authorised, then, the constitution lapsed into the political background. With the prioritisation of the social at the expense of the political, the meaning of swadhinata too bifurcated into a new hierarchy. In the colonial era, social freedom was often seen as the precondition of political freedom. Once independence was achieved, however, it quickly turned into an instrument with which the other half of swadhinata—social freedom—was to be acquired. However, not unlike other small newly independent nations of the 20th century, Bangladesh found it quite difficult to initiate grand planning regimes. The ravages of the war, coupled with the United States (US) sanctions and other predictable difficulties of a new state, led to a devastating famine in 1974—the year after Bangladesh held its first general election.

The instrumentalisation of the question of political freedom ultimately also led to its devaluation. The two concrete manifestations of swadhinata were now territorial integrity and the project of economic development; there was no room for other critical sites of enacting freedom. With the argument that the test for swadhinata resided in economic progress, there remained no substantive barrier to the conclusion that a political arrangement, which could expediently uplift the masses was the most legitimate one. The tragic end of the Bangabandhu's life thus gave in to the various junta regimes that had no difficulty in finding legitimacy through their promise of disciplined development.[2] In fact, Mujib himself briefly experimented with a one-party state—seemingly inspired by the socialist examples of planned development—prior to his assassination. The still extant postcolonial tradition of developmental justification for autocratic regimes bears testament to the fact that the splitting of freedom into the social and the political has often meant the instrumentalisation of the former by the latter. For all the peculiarities of its history, Bangladesh found itself walking a well-trodden path of postcolonial despair.

The Afterlife of Swadhinata

In his opening speech to the Bandung Conference of 1955, Sukarno aptly encapsulated the challenge of the global postcolonial age:

> In 1945, the first year of our national independence, we of Indonesia were confronted with the question of what we were going to do with our independence when it was finally attained … we know how to oppose and to destroy. But then we were suddenly confronted with the necessity of giving content and meaning to our independence. (Sukarno 1956: 41)

This strikingly candid point captured the anxious uncertainty that enveloped new postcolonial states soon after their foundings. We have seen earlier that the non-identity between independence and freedom was well-recognised in colonial India by the second half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, the arrival of independence rather quickly eclipsed the anti-colonial vision of an idealised postcolonial future. To begin with, the institution of universal suffrage and electoral politics reinforced an altogether different set of practices and expectations than the postcolonial founders had foreseen. The prolonged legitimacy and sustained authority of the founding state—deemed necessary for steering the course of history and for "giving content to independence"—proved to be subject to ordinary politics rather than to the extraordinary exception reserved for the proverbial lawgiver. The legitimacy crisis faced by the post-independence regimes in Bangladesh and elsewhere stemmed in no small part from the gap between a new horizon of expectation ushered in by the founding events and under the weight of their own promises.

Returning to an independent Bangladesh from his prison cell in Pakistan, an overwhelmed Mujib recited a couplet of Tagore's ("O bewitched mother/you have kept the seven crore children of yours as Bengali/not as human") and proudly claimed that the people of East Bengal had proven Tagore wrong. With their sacrifice and struggle, they had demolished the myth of the cowardly Bengali (Rahman 2008: 163). In a century when a people without a nation felt like a "man … without his clothes in a crowded assembly" (to use Ambedkar's [2014: 29–30] sarcastic formulation), the achievement of national independence as the proof of a people's claim to full humanity was not surprising. A few days later, still coming to terms with the chaotic effervescence of independence, Mujib articulated his ultimate wish of transforming the "international basket case" (as the US foreign officials characterised the war-torn nation at the time) into the "Switzerland of the East" (Rahman 2008: 170). Mujib's investment in developmentalism, like so many of his contemporaries across Asia and Africa, was genuine, even as his developmental dream lacked any concrete institutional vision. The gifted generation of postcolonial founders across Asia and Africa fashioned new states in the shadow of this developmental calling (Chakrabarty 2008). Both these statements of Mujib were attempts to stabilise the meaning of freedom for a nation whose liminal habitation between the anti-colonial and the postcolonial was soon to be displaced in becoming a poster child of the emerging category of the third world.

Notwithstanding such attempts to domesticate swadhinata, its horizon of meaning resisted foreclosure. In one of the finest literary representations of the event of 1971, novelist Mahmudul Haque narrated the story of a bitter observer who found the popular clamour for swadhinata to be no better than the march of a mindless mass to their own self-immolation. Yet, for all his avant-garde scepticism, Haque's protagonist came to be captivated by the chaotic, if momentary, transformation of the human into the people in the throes of the event of 1971. Enchanted yet incomplete, the idea of swadhinata collapsed into both independence and liberation but did not quite become reducible to either. As Haque's narrative implied, this was mainly because of the idea's conceptual—and political—entanglement with the figure of the people in the founding narrative of Bangladesh (Sultan 2015). Mujib's unqualified embracing of the authority of the people—however fictional such an authority might be—offered an opportunity to escape the 20th-century reduction of Bengali Muslims into a mere interest-bearing demographic. Just as figure of the people is easy to appropriate but never exhausted, so has been the history of the word (swadhinata) that became the rallying cry of East Bengal in 1971. The post-1971 career of popular politics in Bangladesh has been institutionally precarious yet robust in its extra-institutional dimension (Chowdhury 2019). The contradictions of Bangladesh's checkered—but occasionally spirited—experiment with democracy have their roots in the paradoxes of its ineffable founding promise.

NOTES

1 All translations from Bengali are my own.
2 On the afterlife of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, see Chowdhury (2020).

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