

**ACCEPTANCE AND BANQUET SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT
OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE ON RECEIPT OF
BANGLADESH "LIBERATION WAR HONOUR"**

Dhaka, Bangladesh: 04-03-2013

Your Excellency Mr. Mohammad Zillur Rahman,
President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,
Your Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of the
People's Republic of Bangladesh,
Your Excellency Dr. Dipu Moni, Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Your Excellency Capt. A.B. Tajul Islam, Minister of State
for Liberation War Affairs,
Distinguished Members of the Cabinet of the Government
of Bangladesh,
Your Excellency Mr. Muhammad Musharraf Hussain
Bhuiyan,
Cabinet Secretary,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your warm words. I am delighted to be here and am grateful for the affection with which I have been received. This is my first State Visit abroad since I assumed the office of the President the Republic of India.

As I stand here tonight I am filled with memories of the events of 1971. I was 36 years old and a Member of Parliament when the people of Bangladesh engaged themselves in their liberation struggle. Many of us were passionately concerned about the events that were unfolding then. 24-hour television channels did not exist in those days – and it was the Free Bangladesh Radio and All India Radio that gave us reports of the heroic struggle of our brothers and sisters in Bangladesh. These bulletins were keenly followed by us in India - as the minds and hearts of all Indians were with the people of Bangladesh. The plight of millions of homeless people crossing the border, seeking refuge in the neighbouring States of India stirred the hearts of our people as they felt in anguish of that hapless multitude. They came forward wholeheartedly to succour and any assistance they could provide to their brethren from Bangladesh in their hour of need. The images of the proud people of Bangladesh and their brave fight for justice and dignity were etched in every Indian's consciousness.

I recall that, on June 15, 1971, I had the privilege to initiate a discussion on the floor of the Rajya Sabha, the

upper house of the Indian Parliament, when I suggested that India should accord diplomatic recognition to the Government of Bangladesh in exile in Mujibnagar. My words are on the record in proceedings of Rajya Sabha. When a Member sought my suggestion on how to tackle the problem, I responded by saying: *“I am talking of a political solution which means categorically recognising the sovereign democratic Government of Bangladesh. Political solution means giving material help to the democratic, sovereign Government of Bangladesh.....”*. I reminded the House of the many instances in world history when intervention on similar grounds had taken place in past.

We may recall that as early as 1949 Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India stated that “where freedom is menaced, or justice threatened or where aggression takes place, we cannot be and shall not be neutral.”

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman recognized what had to be done and did not lose time in courageously taking the lead and achieving the cherished dream of independence for the proud people of Bangladesh.

Shrimati Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India without any hesitation translated the vision of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru into action by extending the support to the people of Bangladesh.

I feel humbled as I receive this prestigious award, the “Bangladesh Liberation War Honour” as I feel that my contribution was very modest.

As a Member of Indian Delegation in the 59th Conference of Inter Parliamentary Union in Paris (France) in 1971 from 2nd to 10th September, we took the opportunity of the presence of large number of Members of Parliaments of different countries to explain the situation in Bangladesh and urged them to prevail upon their Governments to speak out against the violation of human rights in Bangladesh. I also had the privilege of visiting the United Kingdom and the then Federal Republic of Germany as a Member of the Goodwill Parliamentary Delegation in the same visit. I was mandated to brief the Members of the Parliaments and to the leaders of those countries about the situation. Late Shri H.D. Malviya, former Member of Parliament and activist of the World Peace Council had

accompanied me in this mission. Later I was given the responsibility of visiting the refugee camps in the neighbouring States of India – including Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya and coordinating with the local Governments on making them functional and comfortable.

As I recall those days, I cannot help the feeling that my effort was almost peripheral compared to the enormous responsibilities shouldered by many others during the struggle – not only in Bangladesh but also in India. Therefore, I accept this distinction conferred on me with the greatest humility. A few lines from a poem written by Annadashankar at that time will epitomise the sentiments we had about the liberation struggle of Bangladesh. The author wrote and I am quoting in Bengali:

যতদিন রবে পদ্মা যমুনা

গৌরী মেঘনা বহমান ।

ততদিন রবে কীর্তি তোমার

শেখ মুজিবুর রহমান

Your Excellency, I would like to thank you and the Government of Bangladesh for your gracious gesture in conferring on me the Bangladesh Liberation War Honour. I thank you for remembering, in this manner, the contribution of the Indian brothers and sisters who were by your side, who stood shoulder to shoulder with you and even sacrificed their lives for your liberation. The number of proud Indian citizens that have been honoured and accorded your hospitality in the last year is a tribute to our close friendship. I thank you on their behalf and on behalf of India.

Today, I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the innocent men, women and children who gave their lives for the freedom of the future generations - whose memory is cast in stone at the Savar Memorial and the Shaheed Minar. They showed us how even the weakest can triumph when the cause is righteous. Your Government has redeemed its pledge with history. Today, the children of the muktijoddhas are proud in the knowledge that the blood of their forefathers was not spilled in vain. It is with pride that Bangladesh engages in the task of building a modern, progressive and prosperous nation. As in 1971, so in 2013,

the people of India stand beside the people of Bangladesh. We will walk with you as equal partners, shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm. We are both inheritors of an undivided civilizational legacy. It is no wonder that India and her people share a special connection with Bangladesh. We have an abiding interest in the all-round development of Bangladesh. However, the full potential of our cooperation is yet to be tapped. My discussions during this visit have been extremely rewarding. Our Governments have established a comprehensive framework for cooperation. Our endeavour will be to see how our bilateral cooperation can bring sustained benefits to our people and improve the quality of their lives. This will be the litmus test of the success of our relationship.

Excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

We, in India are happy to see the tremendous strides made by Bangladesh. The impressive and path-breaking manner in which Bangladesh has faced the challenges of eradication of poverty is worthy of emulation. I pay tribute to the people of Bangladesh, its farmers, entrepreneurs,

doctors, teachers, scientists and many others who represent the creative genius of its people.

Excellency, I, personally, have a deep attachment with this land. My wife has family roots here, as she spent a very early and happy part of her childhood here. I am touched by your warm gesture. I see in this award, a strong message of enduring friendship and brotherhood between India and Bangladesh. I fully reciprocate this sentiment as I accept this honour bestowed on me with the deepest gratitude.

With these words, once again I thank Your Excellency President Zillur Rahman, Her Excellency, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the people of Bangladesh who have received me and my wife and members of my delegation with a warmth and affection that has touched us deeply.

We sincerely wish to see India-Bangladesh bilateral relations prosper in all spheres for the progress and prosperity of both our peoples.

Jai Hind

Joy Bangla.