

Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman: A Legendary Leader, Living Forever Through His Deeds



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There are individuals in history who do not merely influence their time; they transcend it to become a perpetual source of inspiration. Their lives, deeds, and ideals guide people for generations. Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman was one such rare personality whose physical absence has never dimmed his influence. To this day, his name is equally invoked when discussing Bangladesh's state ideology, nationalism, democracy, development, and self-respect. While many leaders have appeared in Bangladesh's history—gaining attention for a specific era—very few have left a legacy that transcends time to shape generations. Shaheed Zia is one of them. Over four decades after his martyrdom, as we re-evaluate the state, democracy, development, and national interests, his philosophy and leadership inevitably come to the forefront. This is why it can be said that he is not just a chapter of the past; he is a living part of Bangladesh's ongoing history. He was a legendary leader who will live among us forever.

A Brave Voice in the Crisis of Liberation

March 1971 was the darkest and most uncertain time in the

history of the Bengali nation. With the Pakistani military junta's genocide, the suppression of political leadership, and an uncertain future, terror reigned everywhere. In such a situation, the declaration of independence by Major Ziaur Rahman from the Chittagong radio station served as a beacon of courage and hope for a nation yearning for freedom. He did not stop at the declaration; he played a pivotal role in the Liberation War as a Sector Commander and the leader of the 'Z Force.' His leadership, strategic acumen, and bravery on the battlefield boosted the morale of the freedom fighters. His contribution to the struggle for independence made him an inseparable part of national history. The spirit of the Liberation War was a struggle for self-respect, independence, and justice. Ziaur Rahman was a vital carrier of that spirit, and his military and organizational leadership added momentum to the struggle.

From Soldier to Statesman: A Unique Journey

Rising from a professional army officer to the highest position of the state is no small feat. Ziaur Rahman demonstrated talent, courage, and a sense of responsibility at every step of his career. After joining the Pakistan Army, he quickly proved his mettle. His bravery in the 1965 war earned him distinct recognition. When he took charge of the nation after independence, Bangladesh was engulfed in political and economic crises. The state faced a daunting test—a war-ravaged economy, administrative fragility, food shortages, and political instability. In this context, he navigated the country forward with the discipline of a soldier and the foresight of a statesman. A key characteristic of his leadership was realism; he valued action over emotion and believed in taking effective initiatives to solve problems.

“The Nation Above the Party, The Party Above the Individual”: The Foundation of Statehood

The most potent aspect of Ziaur Rahman’s political philosophy was the prioritization of national interest. His widely cited maxim, “The nation above the party, the party above the individual,” was not merely a political statement; it was the foundation of his statecraft. He believed that the welfare of the state should be the ultimate goal of politics. If the interests of an individual or a party conflicted with the national interest, the national interest had to be prioritized. This philosophy set him apart from conventional political leaders. In today’s climate, where political division, individualism, and power struggles often overshadow national interests, his philosophy remains profoundly relevant.

Architect of Productive Economy and Rural Development

Shaheed Ziaur Rahman realized that Bangladesh’s strength lay within its villages, farmers, and production systems. He famously remarked, “Bangladesh means village.” Centering his development plans on the rural population, he initiated efforts to increase agricultural production, expand irrigation, undertake canal-digging programs, develop rural infrastructure, and strengthen local government. Research indicates that the re-excavation of approximately 14,000 canals had a positive impact on the country’s agriculture and water management. He believed that development could never be city-centric; true progress is only possible when the rural population reaps the benefits. This philosophy became the bedrock of Bangladesh’s rural economy and agricultural development.

Multi-party Democracy and Expansion of Political Participation

One of Ziaur Rahman's significant contributions to Bangladesh's political history was the revitalization of multi-party politics. He expanded the scope for political participation and fostered a democratic culture. During his tenure, people of diverse political opinions and ideologies were given opportunities to participate in state affairs. He believed that the strength of democracy lies in diversity of thought and an inclusive political culture. His stance on democracy was pragmatic; he viewed political stability and national development as complementary.

Development of Education, Culture, and National Identity

Shaheed Zia recognized that economic development is sustainable only when guided by educated, conscious, and values-driven citizens. Consequently, he prioritized the education sector, dedicating the highest budgetary allocation to it for the first time. His commitment was evident in the establishment of the Islamic University in Kushtia, the expansion of the Madrasa Education Board, and reforms in education policy. His initiatives in the library movement and the spread of knowledge were also noteworthy. In culture, he instituted state recognitions like the 'Ekushey Padak,' 'Independence Award,' and 'National Film Awards,' which encouraged national creativity. In his statecraft, culture was an essential element of national identity.

Healthcare and Social Development for a Humane State

Shaheed Ziaur Rahman believed that state development cannot be measured solely by infrastructure or economic indicators; the

quality of human life is the true yardstick. This realization led him to emphasize health and social development. Institutions like the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases and cancer treatment facilities, along with research initiatives and child development programs, reflected his vision for a humane state. Initiatives like 'Shishu Academy' and the talent hunt program 'Notun Kuri' were testaments to his sincerity toward future generations. He believed the greatest responsibility of a state is to protect human life and dignity.

Self-Respecting Foreign Policy and International Stature

The core of Ziaur Rahman's foreign policy was national interest and self-respect. He envisioned a Bangladesh that would cooperate with the world community without compromising its sovereignty or dignity. The conceptualization of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is considered one of his most significant diplomatic contributions. His efforts to improve relations with the Muslim world, his active role in the United Nations, and his drive to enhance Bangladesh's international standing were hallmarks of his diplomatic leadership. His foreign policy was confident, balanced, and centered on national interest.

Relevance to the New Generation

Today's Bangladesh faces a new reality. In an age of technological proliferation, global competition, economic transformation, and political challenges, the new generation needs more than just dreams of development; they require a sense of duty, patriotism, and the ideals of moral leadership. Shaheed Ziaur Rahman's life teaches that lesson—that leadership is impossible without courage, freedom is incomplete without self-respect, and development cannot be achieved without hard work. His life reminds us that the work

of nation-building is a continuous process in which every citizen has a role.

In conclusion, Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman is not just an individual; he is a vital symbol of Bangladesh's political history, national identity, and developmental journey. Times will change, generations will pass, and the challenges of the state will evolve, but the lessons of courage, self-respect, patriotism, and responsibility he left behind will never grow old. That is why he remains alive in the nation's consciousness—present even in his absence.

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