

Growth of Bengali Nationalism and the Liberation of East Pakistan: India's Assistance in the Liberation of East Pakistan and Formation of Bangladesh (1947-1971)

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Introduction

The subcontinent was partitioned in August 1947. This partition not only divided the subcontinent but also caused a division within a division. Pakistan was created with two racially, culturally and linguistically diverse wings – West and East Pakistan – separated by 1600 kilometres of Indian territory. Islam was the only link which united the people of East and West Pakistan whose inhabitants spoke different languages, followed different scripts and belonged to different cultures. Although the majority of the people in Pakistan were Muslims, a considerable number of its inhabitants, particularly in the Eastern region were Hindus, Buddhists and Christians (Chakrabarty, 2004, p.68).

The people of this region irrespective of differences in caste and creed spoke a common language, Bengali and shared a common and rich cultural heritage. On the other hand the region which constituted the Western part of Pakistan was inhabited by people of diverse races and tribes who spoke different languages such as Punjabi, Pushto, Sindhi and Urdu. Jinnah had boldly proclaimed Pakistan to be a modern secular state where religion would not be mixed up with politics and he also assured that the Hindus, Christians and others belonging to the minority communities in Pakistan would enjoy the same rights and privileges as those enjoyed by the Muslim citizens of Pakistan (Ahmed, 1994, pp.81-81). But after the

sudden death of Jinnah in September 1948, the trend towards secularism came to a halt and his successors converted Pakistan into an Islamic State (Ahmed, 1994, p.84). The problem of national identity of Pakistan was largely the problem of the structures of a geographically absurd state, hastily created by the British before their withdrawal from India in 1947. More than 55 percent of the people of Pakistan lived in East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh), whereas the seats of political and economic power and authority lay in West Pakistan. The climatic conditions of the two wings were poles apart and so was the economic condition of their population. The per capita income of West Pakistan was nearly double than that of East Pakistan (Ramchandran, 1996, p.132).

Methodology

The present work is basically qualitative in nature. Historical analysis has been applied to analyse the historical specificity. I have also consulted several books in this regard as secondary source.

Reasons behind the birth of Bangladesh

The history of united Pakistan from 1947 to 1971 was one of constant conflict between Pakistani nationalism which could barely acquire a definite identity, and the emerging Bengali nationalism or sub-nationalism. Like the Muslim nationalism in undivided India, Bengali nationalism within united Pakistan was the product of conflicting national ideas and aspirations (Chowdhury, 1994, p.1). There were several factors that gave rise to Bengali sub-nationalism. In order to entrench its hold over the entire country almost immediately after the birth of Pakistan, the West Pakistan political leaders were quick to realise that it was necessary to overpower the Bengalis, who were numerically larger. This could be made possible only by the political, economic, linguistic and cultural subjugation of the Bengalis. The Bengali intelligentsia could easily understand that in order to establish their permanent hold over Pakistan, the ruling group of West Pakistan were bent upon the destruction of the Bengali language and culture in the name of Islam and national unity (Upreti, 2004, p.26). Moreover, the West Pakistanis were oblivious to the fact that while they said they were protecting Islam, which did not need defending, they were jeopardising the future and the very existence of Pakistan. The West Pakistani elite, primarily the Punjabi and Mohajir, monopolised the government, administration, the armed forces, business, commerce, banking, intellectual life, essentially all important features of society. The demands of the Bengali population for a proper distribution of the country's resources and opportunities went unheard. Feeble efforts at placating the Bengalis only deepened their despair and intensified their rage (Ziring, 1992, p.14).

I shall divide my paper into two parts. In the first part I shall discuss the reasons behind the growth of Bengali nationalism and the language movement and in the second part I shall discuss the reasons behind India's support to the liberation struggle of Bangladesh.

Linguistic and cultural subjugation

The euphoria of religious nationalism received its first blow when the ruling elite of Pakistan decided in making Urdu the sole language of Pakistan, consciously ignoring the fact that Urdu speaking Pakistanis did not exceed 3 percent of the total population. The majority in Pakistan which included all Bengali Muslims forming 54 percent of the population did not even understand Urdu language (Upreti, 2004, p. 28). On September 2, 1947 some students of the Dhaka University formed Tamaddun Majlish, a cultural organisation. During the first phase of the language movement this organisation campaigned for making Bangla the medium of education and of legal proceedings. On September 15, 1947 they brought out a pamphlet titled "Should Pakistan's state language be Urdu or Bengali?" In that pamphlet they

demanding Bengali (Bangla) to be the medium of instruction in educational institutions, of legal matters and of all official works and also the language of the Central Government of Pakistan (Cherunilam, 1987, p.43). The Muslim leaders of Bengal were very interested in the recognition of Bengali as one of the official languages. The efforts to get the recognition of Bengali language was manifested in the formation of the 'Rashtra Bhasa Sangram Parishad' in October, 1947 (State Language Committee of Action) which was very persistent in giving Bengali its due share. The rulers of Pakistan, Jinnah (the first Governor-General of Pakistan) and Liaquat Ali Khan (the first Prime Minister of Pakistan) were quick to realise the growing spirit of Bengali Nationalism. They knew that East Bengal was the seat of Bengali culture and Bengali language embodied the cultural ethos of the Bengalis (Upreti, 2004, p.28). On his first official visit to East Bengal in February 1948, Jinnah declared that Urdu alone would be the national language of Pakistan. The Bengalis of East Pakistan reacted sharply. It provoked a never ending series of protests and resistance movements. The protests were led by a young student leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was taken into custody. East Bengal felt that their cherished culture and way of life were threatened. The Bengali members of the Constituent Assembly were denied permission to speak in Bengali. Liaquat Ali Khan argued that Pakistan was a Muslim state and it should have the language of the Muslim state, and that language was Urdu. Urdu was spoken in some areas of West Pakistan. But it had never been the language of any part of West Pakistan. It lacked indigenous roots and geographical identity. Each province had its own language other than Urdu. Moreover Bengali was the mother tongue of the majority population of Pakistan (Badrudin, 1997, pp. 334-335)

Things turned worse when the Pakistan Government not only tried to make Urdu the national language but also tried to introduce the Arabic script in place of the Bengali language. Even the recommendations of the East Bengal Language Committee, which included Sanskritisation of the language, were avoided. Attempts of the Pakistani rulers towards promoting Urdu and Islamic culture implied disaster for rich heritage of Bengali culture. The issue proved highly emotional and served as a catalyst in arousing the cultural consciousness of the Bengalis. In 1952, the agitation reached its peak when the Central Government attempted to introduce the Arabic script for the Bengali language and more so, when Nurul Amin's Government issued a prohibitory order against holding processions in Dhaka. Protests and hartals took place against the government's decision of banning major publications like Ananda Bazar Patrika, Amrita Bazar Patrika and introduction of Arabic script (Upreti, 2004, pp.28-28). When Urdu was made the official language, government jobs were monopolised by the Urdu-speaking population of West Pakistan. As Urdu was unknown to the people of East Bengal, their already neglected job opportunities received a further setback. These considerations led to a serious language movement in East Bengal in February 1952 (Islam, 1987, p.11). The volcano of anger against West Pakistan erupted in 1952 in the form of language riots spearheaded by the students of Dhaka University. A big demonstration against the government's declaration about Urdu being the state language was held on February 21, 1952. Prohibitory orders were promulgated to crush the agitation but these were defied by the students. This resulted in police firing, killing and injuring a number of students. This day 'Ekushey February' (February 21) came to be known as 'Shoheed Dibas' (Martyr's Day) and a 'Shoheed Minar' (Martyr's Memorial) was built in the memory of those killed (Singh, 2007, p.6). The Legislative Assembly of East Bengal passed a resolution requesting the Central Government to recognise Bengali as one of the national languages. Faced with strong opposition, Bengali was made a national language together with Urdu in 1954. Yet the controversy effectively inhibited the development of a national identity and unity (Islam, 1987, p.11).

The 1952 language movement symbolised the advent of Bengali nationalism with

solidarity for Bengalis. It consolidated the Bengalis under one banner and imbued them with an ardent zeal to assert their rights. The renaissance of East Bengal, by repudiating the concept of Islamic culture, brought the Hindus and Muslims and other communities of East Bengal together as inheritors of a common cultural past. Rooted in the noble ideas of Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam and nurtured by liberal humanists like Mohammed Shahidullah, Kazi Motar Hussain and Abdul Fazl, language and culture emerged as the chief hallmark of Bengali nationalism. (Upreti, 2004, p.29).

Economic exploitation

The people of East Pakistan were not only subject to linguistic and cultural exploitation but they also became victims of economic exploitation by West Pakistan. The most serious complaint of the Bengalis' was the "economic exploitation" of East Pakistan by the Pakistan Central Government. The East Pakistanis alleged that income disparity was largely the result of a systematic subordination of interests of the Eastern region to those of the West (Upreti, 2004, p.30). East Pakistan earned most of the country's foreign exchange by the export of jute; yet most of the foreign exchange was spent on the industrialisation of West Pakistan. A high percentage of the budget was spent on defence, which was all concentrated in West Pakistan. Moreover, allocation of domestic investment reinforced the income disparity and the tariffs and import quotas raised the prices in East Pakistan in order to provide profits and jobs to the residents of West Pakistan. Whether it was revenue or development expenditure, foreign assistance and loans or foreign exchange, East Pakistan did not get a fair share, though it contained a majority of the country's population (Chowdhury, 1994, p.9). The glaring disparity was evident in the report of the Planning Commission, which stated that in 1959-60, the per capita income in West Pakistan was 32 percent higher than in the East Pakistan. Over the next ten years the annual rate of growth of income of West Pakistan was 6.2 percent while it was only 4.2 percent in East Pakistan. As a result, by 1969-70, the per capita income of West Pakistan was 61 percent higher than in the East Pakistan. According to an official report, East Pakistan transferred approximately \$ 2.6 billion to West Pakistan over the period 1948-49 to 1968-70. This economic domination of the West over the East was further accentuated by the fact that well entrenched civil service and senior military members of the administration were West Pakistanis. Besides, the location of central government in West Pakistan had encouraged the concentration of industry and entrepreneurial class in West Pakistan, along with the concentration of primary economic activities in the western wing (Upreti, 2004, pp.30-31). A report made by a panel of experts to the Pakistan Government's Planning Commission in 1970 provides authoritative documentation of increasing economic disparity between the two regions.¹

Political deprivation

Ever since the partition of the Indian sub-continent and the creation of Pakistan as an independent state, one of the crucial problems faced by the Pakistani leaders was that of evolving a constitutional consensus and framing a constitution acceptable to the different geographical regions, cultural and linguistic groups constituting Pakistan (Chitkara, 1997, p.4). Since its birth, Pakistan had virtually been governed by the civil service backed by the army. Jinnah was the de-facto ruler. On partition India adopted a Westminster model of democracy and Nehru became the Prime Minister. Whereas Pakistan opted for the British-Indian Viceregal system of government. Instead of becoming the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Jinnah took up the role of Governor-General of Pakistan. This new role provided that office with an enormous degree of effective powers which are normally absent in a parliamentary democracy. Both Jinnah (Governor-General) and Liaquat Ali Khan (Prime Minister) heavily relied on the

bureaucracy. Jinnah encouraged the top bureaucrats of various departments at the centre and the provincial chief secretaries to communicate with him directly on matters of vital interests. The provincial governors and civil servants exercised unparalleled power without any interference from the politicians. They often kept politicians under control. Under Jinnah's administration the bureaucracy became extremely powerful. The emergence of such an all-powerful bureaucracy produced impacts on East Bengal. East Bengal was heavily under-presented in the bureaucracy. All the key officials there were from West Pakistan. As a result, no room was left for the Bengalis to participate in the power structure both at the centre and at the provincial level. This generated considerable resentment in East Bengal. The people there were apprehensive of their future. They felt that real power was gravitating to the West. The ruling elites increasingly ignored the political and economic aspirations of East Pakistan. The central administration disregarded the basic concepts of the Lahore Resolution on the strength of which Pakistan came into being. The central government never conceded the equal and autonomous right of East Bengal. Instead the central government increasingly interfered with all vital affairs and authority of East Bengal and this attitude of the central government completely demoralised and disappointed the Bengalis. After Jinnah's death in September 1948, for example, Khwaja Nazimuddin, the then Chief Minister of East Bengal, became Governor-General. The East Bengal Legislature wanted to elect the successor Chief Minister, but it did not happen as the centre instructed the East Bengal Governor to appoint Nurul Amin, as the Chief Minister without his being elected by the legislature. This led to defections from the Muslim League. As early as on February 24, 1948, a Bengali member of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly expressed in the Assembly that 'a feeling is growing among the East Pakistanis that Eastern Pakistan is being neglected and treated merely as a "Colony" of Western Pakistan' (Islam, 1987, pp.12-13).

The Awami Muslim League was formed in Dhaka on June 4, 1949 in reaction to the Muslim League claims that it was the only legitimate political party in the country. The inaugural convention was chaired by Aatur Rahman, and an organising committee was assembled comprising of Maulana Bhashni as president, Shamsul Huq as secretary and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the lesser role of joint secretary who was then at Dhaka's municipal jail (Ziring, 1992, p.18). Later on the word 'Muslim' was dropped from the nomenclature of the party to clarify its secular aspirations and it came to be known as the Awami League (Chitkara, 1997, p.9).

During eleven years (1947-1958) of the so called parliamentary democracy, in Pakistan there was not a single general election and the provincial elections were described "a farce, a mockery and a fraud upon the electorate".² Well organized political parties did not exist and with the decline of the Muslim League, there was no national party; the remaining parties were more narrowly based than those in the new Asian democracies, not to speak of parliamentary democracy. The failure of parliamentary democracy led to the development of an all-powerful and irresponsible executive, aided and supported by a powerful bureaucracy. Pakistan was dominated by bureaucrats and soldiers. The emergence of this all powerful ruling elite had a great impact on the separatist movement in East Bengal. The ruling elite was composed of senior bureaucrats, none of whom was East Bengali. Upto 1958 they were supported indirectly by the Army; and after 1958, Army support was direct and open. There was a cabinet and a parliament, but the political order in Pakistan could be called "an oligarchy under a democratic constitution". It was a "modernising oligarchy" in which the Bengalis had no share. Except during the short 13 month interval of H.S. Suhrawardy's cabinet in 1956-57, the Bengalis hardly had any role in the national affairs. Every vital decision, whether it was related to political, economic, defence or diplomatic matters, was in the final analysis made by the ruling elite, composed of West Pakistani civil or military officers (Chowdhury, 1994, pp. 5-6).

After Ayub Khan came to power in 1958, there was complete authoritarian rule in Pakistan until 1962. Then came a period of controlled or guided democracy, under which the President and the same old ruling elite dominated the political scene. The political order as set up by Ayub in his 1962 Constitution, hardly gave the Bengalis any scope for effective and equal participation in the national affairs. They had no share in the decision making process. In any vital national issue they could only react; they could never act. In the above situation there was hardly any scope for the Bengalis to develop common national feelings with the West Pakistanis, apart from the religious bond of Islam. The Islamic ideology, on which Jinnah based Pakistan, started to fade away, and regional feelings grew fast in East Bengal. Regionalism was the *raison d'être* behind the emergence of Bangladesh. Hence forth East Bengal became a hotbed for political agitation and unrest. Hardly a year passed without Bengalis revolting against alleged maltreatment by the central government. The result was shootings and killings, which further gave impetus to the growth of Bengali nationalism. By the 1960's most of the urban professional Bengali groups were beginning to consider seriously whether they could or would live together with the western part of the country. People in East Pakistan no longer concealed their hatred of West Pakistan. But the greatest blow to Pakistani nationalism came as a result of the Indo-Pakistan war of September 1965 (Chowdhury, 1994, pp. 5-6). This war over the Kashmir issue exposed to the people of East Pakistan that their defence depended entirely on the Pakistani defence force stationed in West Pakistan. When the war broke out, East Pakistan was left completely defenceless and vulnerable to Indian invasion. It was India's self-imposed restraint that saved East Pakistan on that occasion. The Bengalis were convinced that their defence could never be trusted to West Pakistan. The establishment of a defence force in East Pakistan was one of the most earliest and persistent demands of the Bengalis (Islam, 1987, pp. 23-24). After the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965, when the All Pakistan National Conference met in February 1966 at Lahore, Mujibur Rahman spoke of the "neglect of East Pakistan". This was the meeting where he placed his six-point formula, which became the basis for a national struggle for East Bengal. The six points were: 1) establishment of a federation on the basis of the Lahore Resolution³ and the Parliamentary framework of government with supremacy of legislature directly elected on the basis of adult franchise. 2) The transfer of all subjects of the federating states except defence and foreign affairs which the federal government would administer. 3) Two separate but freely convertible currencies for the two wings or one currency with safeguard against the flight of currency from East to West Pakistan. 4) The resting of these provisions in the hands of the federating states with the central government receiving a fixed share. 5) Complete freedom in respect of foreign trade, including authority for the unit government to establish trade and commerce with foreign countries. 6) Authority for East Pakistan to set up its own military or para-military forces (Nayar, 1972, p.144).

The West Pakistani elite viewed this as a separatist movement meant to destroy the territorial integrity of Pakistan and the interests of the people of the West wing. They found a good pretext in this movement to arrest Mujib on March 20, 1966. The Awami League gave a call for complete hartal (strike) in East Bengal on June 7, in order to demonstrate the popular support behind its six-point programme. The movement intensified when the Ayub government tried to suppress it. The government decided to release Mujib on January 1, 1968, but as soon as he was released he was again arrested at the jail gate itself and sent back to Dhaka cantonment on the charge of having worked with the Agartala based Indian agents with a secessionist objective (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, p.45).

The Pakistan government could not substantiate its case and had to release Mujib unconditionally along with others on February 22, 1969 (Nayar, 1972, p.144). On March 25, 1969 Ayub Khan handed over power to General Yahya Khan who declared martial law throughout the country. In the December 1970 polls, the Awami League secured an absolute

majority, but the election results were defied by the Pakistani government. The military regime of Yahya, adopted repressive measures in order to suppress the people's verdict by force. Mujib along with thousands of his supporters were arrested on March 25, 1971. The Bengali members of the East Bengali Regiment, East Bengal Rifles, police and paramilitary forces, Awami League supporters, students, intellectuals and innocent masses were massacred. The whole world was shocked and condemned this genocide. Despite the unprecedented repressions, the people of East Bengal were fully behind Mujib and very soon the demand for regional autonomy turned into a demand for complete independence of East Bengal and the formation of Bangladesh (Singh, 2007, pp.9-10).

Role of India in the Emergence of Bangladesh

It has been a consistent and vitally important principle of Indian Foreign Policy to refrain from any interference in the internal affairs of other countries and more particularly, in the internal affairs of its neighbour. But the dirty struggle for power that emerged in Pakistan after the first ever general elections held in December 1970, created a highly taxing and dangerous situation in East Pakistan, which forced India to support, on humanitarian grounds, the rights of the Bengalis living in East Pakistan (Jayapalan, 2001, p.311) The Pakistan government feels that the internal political tensions in East-West Pakistan were fully utilised by its hostile neighbour, India, which not only divided the two parts of the country geographically but also took an active role in aggravating the internal tensions in the country in the twin expectations of weakening its principle enemy (Pakistan) and belying Jinnah's two nation theory (Chowdhury, 1994, p.4).

The people of East Bengal, till 1970, did not voice their support for liberation from the clutches of West Pakistan. However, the attempts of General Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples' Party to prevent the transfer of power in Pakistan to East Bengal based on Mujib's Awami League that created a sense of deep deprivation among the Bengali population of East Pakistan or East Bengal. This resulted to a sharp and violent protest and reaction in East Bengal and which forced the people of East Bengal to launch a civil disobedience movement for securing their legitimate rights, and for ending the era of exploitation. The failure of General Yahya Khan to transfer power to Awami League, which had secured clear majority in the December 1970 Elections, the arrest of Sheikh Mujib in March 1971 and the military crackdown inflicted on the people of East Bengal gave rise to revolution against West Pakistan and to the declaration of Bangladesh as a sovereign republic. Initially India decided to maintain strictly its policy of keeping away from the internal affairs of Pakistan. It viewed with alarm the happenings in East Bengal but decided to maintain complete neutrality (Jayapalan, 2001, p.311).

The Indian Government's initial reaction to the crisis was confined to an expression of sympathy for the freedom fighters of Bangladesh. Mrs. Indira Gandhi on March 27, 1971 said that, India would keep in "as close touch as possible" with the developments in East Bengal and take appropriate decisions. Swaran Singh, the then Indian Foreign Minister expressed the hope that democratic processes "would operate to fulfil the aspirations of the vast majority of the people there." The Parliament unanimously pledged India's profound sympathy for and solidarity with the people of East Pakistan in their struggle for a democratic way of life. Initially, the Indian Government planned a limited action. The Indian Border Security Force was allowed to send some men and material to help the freedom fighters or 'Mukti Bahini', while the Indian army was asked to prepare for all eventualities (Nayar, 1972, p.155). Despite the support given to the Mukti Bahini, India was still hoping that Pakistan would agree to a peaceful solution of East Bengal crisis, release Mujib, hold talks with the elected leaders of East Bengal and come to a settlement which could be acceptable to them and create a sense of security so that the refugees could go back. New Delhi also

repeatedly took a stand that the issue was no longer either the internal problem of Pakistan or that of Indo-Pakistani dispute, but instead the problem was an international one, with direct bearing on India, endangering its security, owing to the problem of enormous influx of refugees into India (Ramchandran, 1996, pp. 144-145). For India, the direct cost of coping with the massive influx of refugees was staggering. The indirect cost – the long-range impact of the refugee influx on India's development and economy was even worse (Kennedy, 1971, p.33).

The developments in East Pakistan had an immediate impact on India because of the refugee influx. The initial Indian response, though sharp, was circumspect. The leadership in New Delhi wanted to avoid the impression that it was ready to promptly provide support to the Bengali resistance in East Pakistan. This caution, however, did not last long as in mid-April, 1971 India allowed the establishment of an Awami League office near Calcutta and, on April 17, permitted the announcement of a 'government in exile' from Baidyanath Tala, popularly referred to as 'Mujibnagar'. A Radio Free Bangla was set up near Calcutta and on April 18, the Pakistani Deputy High Commission in Park Circus, Calcutta was taken over by an East Bengali defector from Pakistan Foreign Service, Husain Ali, and from that point onwards, it served as the de facto mission of Bangladesh to India with India's tacit co-operation. A number of prominent Awami League officials, including Tajuddin Ahmed, Nazrul Islam, Mansur Ali, and Col. M.A.G. Osmani, also took refuge in Calcutta. They were housed in a government-owned property at Shakespeare Sarani, Calcutta. Once the political leadership was safely ensconced in Calcutta, India started to arm, train, and provide sanctuaries to the 'Mukti Bahini' (literally meaning the liberation force), a Bengali guerilla force, along the border areas. The 'Mukti Bahini' was composed of students, civil servants and former members of the East Pakistani Rifles (EPR). They were placed under the command of Col. Osmani, a retired East Pakistani army officer. During the conduct of military operations the Mukti Bahini played a vital role in fighting against West Pakistani forces (Ganguly, 2002, p. 62).

The first step that India took in response to the critical developments in East Pakistan was to indicate its clear sympathy for the triumph of democracy in East Pakistan and the fulfilment of the legitimate aspirations of the people of Pakistan (as a whole) as manifested in the December 1970 and January 1971 elections. In the immediate aftermath of the military crackdown and the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, senior leaders of the Awami League escaped to India and sought Indian support for the establishment of a government in exile. The first formal step India took was the establishment of such a government under the leadership of Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed. The second move was to give refuge to East Bengali military and para-military personnel who escaped to India as they were particular targets of the extensive military crackdown orchestrated by General Tikka Khan from March 25, 1971 onwards (Dixit, 1999, p.47). The Republic of independent and sovereign Bangladesh was pro- claimed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on March 26, 1971. A special mission on behalf of the Government of the newly proclaimed republic of Bangladesh was sent to New Delhi and other world capitals and to the United Nations. The government of Bangladesh appealed to India, Ceylone (now Sri Lanka) and other democratic countries of the world to take note of the formation of the government and recognise it and establish diplomatic relations with it. The Government of India was faced with the crucial question whether to accord recognition or not to the Bangladesh Republic especially when a provisional government with some territory under its control was set up and asked for recognition (Grover, 1992, pp.149-150).

The deadly atrocities committed by General Tikka Khan upon the Bengali population of East Pakistan precipitated in a full scale civil war by March-April, 1971 in Pakistan. The civil war contributed to the flight of some 10 million refugees into India over the course of

the succeeding few months. Indian policy makers, faced with unprecedented human influx, calculated that it was cheaper to resort to war against their long drawn adversary than to passively absorb the refugees into their own turgid population (Ganguly, 2002, p.51). By the third week of May the flow of refugees from East Pakistan to the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura reached alarming proportions causing demographic pressure and straining the resources of these Indian states. Although it extended general support to the East Pakistanis, India was cautious not to take macro-level diplomatic or political steps in support of the liberation struggle. While providing facilities for the establishment of an interim government and giving general support to the resistance movement, India had not given recognition to what came to be known as the Mujibnagar Government. Responding to the large scale influx of refugees from East Pakistan, Mrs. Indira Gandhi established a separate department to deal with the East Pakistani refugees under the charge of the then Secretary, Rehabilitation, to the Government of India (Dixit, 1999, pp.48-49).

Mrs. Gandhi became convinced that the right political climate for the return of refugees to their homes must be created as India could not go on supporting people who were not a part of the Indian mainland, as India was not an affluent nation but a developing economy. At the end of March 1971, Mrs. Gandhi through India's Permanent Representative at the United Nations (UN), asked the Secretary General to advise restraint on the part of the Pakistani Government, to stop slaughter in East Pakistan. The Secretary General, U. Thant, was informed by Pakistan that this was an internal affair and did not come within the scope of the United Nations (UN), India then decided to make all-out effort to enlist the support of the world powers, to persuade Pakistan to re-establish peace and harmony in East Pakistan (Chitkata, 1997, p.17).

From early May 1971 to the end of July, diplomatic efforts were directed towards forging a world opinion. The then Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, External Affairs Minister, Sardar Swaran Singh, veteran leader, Jayaprakash Narayan and several delegations toured the world. Between June 5 and June 22, 1971, the External Affairs Minister visited Moscow, Paris, Ottawa, New York, Washington and London and held discussions with the leaders there. He requested them to curb aid and assistance to Pakistan so that the latter would be forced to put a halt to repression in East Bengal. He also appealed to them to help India provide food, shelter and medicines to the refugees. India made it clear that finding an amicable solution for the problem of refugees and restoration of democratic rights to the people of East Bengal was not only India's responsibility but it was a problem that concerned the world, all countries especially the big powers should come forward and help India and they should foster peace and security in the region (Gulati, 1988, p.49).

India first took up the East Pakistan issue in the United Nations (UN) as a refugee problem. Our Ambassadors to the UN offices at New York and Geneva were instructed to give detailed factual briefings to the ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council), UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees), and other related agencies about the violently critical events in East Pakistan and its negative fallout on India in terms of economic, demographic and social pressures on Indian states neighbouring East Pakistan. Similar instructions went out to all diplomatic missions to mobilise support from all the governments to which they were accredited. Mrs. Gandhi had also appointed a core group of senior advisers to deal with the crisis. The group comprised of D.P. Dhar, P.N. Haksar, T.N. Kaul, R.N. Kaw, P.N. Dhar, Y.B. Chavan and Jagjivan Ram (Dixit, 1999, p.48-49).

On the basis of the recommendations of the core group India decided on a policy approach to resolve the East Pakistan crisis and in case of the failure of the interim recommendations, India would exercise the military options. India decided on a policy approach having the following elements:

- 1) The East Pakistan crisis can be resolved only if Pakistan respects the results of the

general elections and assures the fulfilment of the legitimate political and constitutional aspirations of the people of East Pakistan.

- 2) To achieve this objective the military regime should immediately release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from custody enabling him to return to Dhaka, and recommence political negotiations with him.
- 3) Pakistan should ensure the return of all East Pakistan refugees to their homes, undertaking to guarantee their safety, honour and economic well-being.
- 4) Pakistan should immediately stop the military crackdown on the people of East Pakistan. Pakistani troops should return to the barracks.
- 5) The international community should influence and pressurise Pakistan to resolve the East Pakistan crisis by peaceful means. This advice and pressure should be generated through bilateral diplomatic channels and through the United Nations.
- 6) The United Nations and its specialised agencies should initiate immediate steps to give relief and rehabilitation assistance to millions of East Pakistani refugees in India and those who have become shelterless within East Pakistan due to military crackdown, and follow it up to generate pressure on the Pakistani government to revive democracy in East Pakistan (Dixit, 1999, pp.51-52).

The Pakistani government accused that India was interfering in the internal affairs of Pakistan and was hatching a conspiracy to break up Pakistan by deliberately creating a separatist movement in East Pakistan and giving it open military support. Pakistan did not respond to the Indian suggestion for releasing Mujibur Rahman unconditionally, or about re-opening political negotiations with him. Pakistan also engaged in propaganda that the refugees who had come into India were rebels and “secessionist miscreants” and that majority of them were Hindus. It also accused India of giving support to the Government in exile and to East Pakistani resistance groups – an accusation which had a certain degree of truth in it. There were no indications of Pakistan pulling back from its confrontationalist stance. The Indian government increasingly started feeling that the exercise of military option in support of the liberation struggle of the East Pakistanis (Bangladeshis) is inevitable (Dixit, 1999, p.52). The most serious strategic step that India took in preparation of this possibility was the signing of the Indo-Soviet Agreement on Peace, Friendship and Co-operation on the August 7, 1971. As far as India was concerned the general objective of the agreement was to provide a legal and political basis to seek Soviet assistance in case India’s security was threatened by any country. The second and the most specific objective was to provide a basis for future support from the Soviet Union in case the USA and Pakistan, or Pakistan and China acted in concert with each other to thwart any military operation which India might undertake in support of Bangladesh’s liberation struggle (Ganguly, 2002, pp.65-66).

The Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, toured Austria, Belgium, Britain, France, the USA and West Germany from October 24 to November 12, 1971. She met the members of the ‘Aid – Pakistan Consortium’ with the request for stoppage of aid to Pakistan. In the USA, she urged the US President Richard Nixon to use his good offices to secure the release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to effect a political solution of the crisis, and arrange for a dialogue between the leaders of the two wings (Gulati, 1988, p.49).

But when none of the above diplomatic efforts could yield a desirable result then India started to exert steady military pressure on Pakistan. On November 22, 1971, Indian forces along the border areas of East Pakistan had started to provide artillery fire to protect the Mukti Bahini as they conducted operations within East Pakistan and then sought refuge in Indian territory. The Pakistani military regime found this form of sustained Indian involvement increasingly intolerable and therefore it felt compelled to act. The war formally started with a pre-emptive air attack by Pakistan on India’s northern air bases on December 3, 1971 including Ambala in Haryana, Amritsar in Punjab, and Udhampur in Jammu and

Kashmir. The attack failed miserably on all counts. The Indian Air Force retaliated the next day, striking a number of West Pakistani air bases, including those at Islamabad, Sargodha and Karachi (Ganguly, 2002, pp.67-68).

Immediately upon the declaration of open hostilities, the Indian forces entered East Bengal and the liberation of Bangladesh was declared India's objective. The Indian operations in the Eastern Sector were the most successful. The 1971 war though was a short war, but also in some ways the most violent of those wars which India and Pakistan have fought so far against each other. On December 6, 1971, when the Indian forces penetrated far into East Bengal, India recognised the independent country of Bangladesh. Pakistan immediately broke of diplomatic relations with India. The Indian Air Force along with the Indian Naval Force won decisive victory both in the Eastern as well as the Western sector (Blinkerberg, 1998, pp. 266-267). On December 6, 1971 Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi announced in the Lok Sabha that the Government of India has decided 'to grant recognition to the Gana Praja tantri Bangladesh.' India was the first country in the world to grant recognition to the newly formed country of Bangladesh. She also made it clear that India's recognition to Bangladesh cannot be regarded as an act of intervention as Pakistan has waged war against India, the normal hesitation on the part of the Government of India "not to do anything which would come in the way of a peaceful solution or which might be construed as an intervention has lost significance." India's recognition of Bangladesh was a logical consequence of Pakistan's armed aggression on India and suppression of the political aspirations of the people of Bangladesh by ruthless force (Mehrish, 1992, p.153). The Mukti Bahini and the Indian forces played important and complementary roles in bringing the Liberation war to a swift end. Pakistan surrendered after 14 days of fighting. The instrument of surrender was signed at the Race Course Maidan in Dhaka on December 16, 1971 by Lt. General A.A.K. Niazi (Pakistan's Chief Commanding Officer) on behalf of Pakistani forces in Bangladesh. Lt. General Jagjit Singh Aurora, GOC-in-Command of Indian and Bangladeshi forces in Eastern Sector accepted the surrender (Singh, 2007, pp. 44-45). After the defeat of the West Pakistani Army in Bangladesh, the administration of the country was entrusted to the leaders of Bangladesh. Soon afterwards, Bangladesh was granted recognition by other states and this completed the process of liberation of Bangladesh (Jayapalan, 2001, pp. 313-314).

The Government of India made it clear that India had no territorial ambitions either in Bangladesh or West Pakistan. It was not India which created the conditions which led to the present unfortunate situation. These conditions were the result of Pakistan's refusal to meet the aspirations of 75 million people inhabiting East Bengal, upon whom Pakistan perpetrated repression and genocide which provided the flame for the freedom movement of Bangladesh. After Bangladesh gained independence, Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had a cordial meeting at the Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata in January 1972. Large number of people gathered to see the two most influential political personalities of India and Bangladesh. Waves of applause greeted Bangabandhu as he rose to address the massive gathering. He began his speech in English. But when the crowd clamoured to hear his speech in Bengali, a happy Bangabandhu switched to his mother tongue. The crowd roared its approval. Mujib talked of Pakistani exploitation of his country and of Pakistani atrocities against his countrymen. He warmly praised Mrs. Indira Gandhi for her support and denounced the United States Government for siding with Pakistan. In his speech at the Brigade Parade Ground, Bangabandhu repeatedly spoke of the unity of feelings between the people of Bangladesh and India in their ideals and beliefs. He hoped that Bangladesh would prosper amidst undying friendship between the two countries.

Reasons for India's support

As the movement for autonomy gained strength in East Pakistan, public opinion in India, particularly in West Bengal, became very supportive of the movement because the Bengalis of West Bengal had linguistic as well as cultural ties with the Bengalis of East Pakistan. Therefore the Government of India could not ignore the emotional and ethnic sympathy of the people of West Bengal for the East Pakistani population. The possibility of a strategic nexus between China and Pakistan centered around East Pakistan was an additional factor that contributed to Indian support to the movement for autonomy in East Pakistan. If the people of East Pakistan driven by socio-ethnic and linguistic factors and in face of irrational and obstinate negation of their basic rights and aspirations, wished to secede from Pakistan, India could have no objection. If Indian endorsement and support could result in the emergence of friendly entity it would be beneficial. A non-hostile Bangladesh in place of a hostile East Pakistan was considered beneficial by India (Dixit: 1999, pp.57).

There were both fundamental strategic considerations and immediate political compulsions for India to support the liberation struggle in Bangladesh. In years following the partition, Pakistan had utilised its Eastern wing as a base for subversive activities and secessionist movements against India. Apart from sending the Hindu population of East Pakistan as refugees to India, East Pakistan was also utilised as a base for supplying finances and arms to separatist organisations operating in India's North East (Dixit, 1999, pp.55).

Conclusion

The immediate provocation for India to support the liberation struggle of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) was of course, the humanitarian disaster that followed Pakistan's denial of democratic rights to the East Pakistanis and the brutal military crackdown on the civilian population. But a question is widely asked among the Pakistani circle of scholars and diplomats that did India only have a humanitarian interest in the democratic aspirations of the Bengalis of East Pakistan? Another argument that India offered to justify her involvement in the Bangladesh crisis was the heavy burden resulting from the influx of "ten million" refugees into the Indian mainland. But the most pertinent issue that is raised by the Pakistani circle of scholars and critics is however that what justification, if any, India had in extending not only moral support, which might have been understandable but also active military support to an armed uprising in a neighbouring country. Her intervention in the Bangladesh crisis within 48 hours of its inception on March 25, 1971, when not a single refugee had gone to India, could hardly be described merely as furthering a desire to restore the "democratic rights" of the Bengalis. A federated unit of another country made a unilateral declaration of independence and India allowed that rebel group to form an exile government on her soil. She also aided that government in its functioning by providing all facilities including a clandestine broadcasting station, and arming the forces of that exile government, the Mukti Bahini or the liberation army.

However, whatever charges may be offered by the Pakistani critics, it can by no means be denied that India played a highly significant role in the liberation of Bangladesh. The Indian people along with the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force made bold contributions and sacrifices for securing to the people of Bangladesh their freedom and their legitimate rights that had been denied and curbed by the brutal West Pakistani military regime. These historic and unparalleled sacrifices made by the Indian people and the moral support and material resources that they gave to the people of Bangladesh combined together to provide a solid foundation for the development of warm and highly friendly and co-operative relations between India and Bangladesh.

The tone was set right on December 6, 1971, when Mrs. Indira Gandhi, while announcing her decision to grant recognition to Bangladesh observed "In future the

Governments and people of India and Bangladesh who share common ideals and sacrifices, would forge a relationship based on principles of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit" (Jayapalan, 2001, p. 314-315).

The emergence of Bangladesh was thus an expression of the determination of the East Bengalis to establish their identity. India's dominant role in the birth of Bangladesh was obvious. India's argument behind providing help to the Bangladeshis was said to have been guided by humanitarian considerations and for the restoration of democratic rights to oppressed people in East Pakistan. The Indian action however, was not a premeditated plan. It was a spontaneous reaction to the scenario developing in the regional and international sphere in which she had exhausted all political and diplomatic means and therefore was left with the final military option to be exercised.

¹ The most striking fact in this report was the widening gap between the income of the average West Pakistani and his Eastern counterpart (Report of the Experts on Fourth Five Year Plan, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, 1970).

² Report of the Electoral Reforms Commission, (Government of Pakistan, Karachi, 1956).

³ The Lahore Resolution commonly known as Pakistan Resolution was the formal political statement adopted by the All India Muslim League on the occasion of the three day general session between March 22 and March 24, 1940 at Lahore that called for greater Muslim autonomy in British India. This has largely been interpreted as a demand for a separate Muslim state, Pakistan. The resolution was presented by A.K. Fazlul Haq.

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