

# Emergence and Nation Building Process in Bangladesh: Role of India

**NAZMUL HUSSAIN LASKAR**

Assistant Professor

P.D.U. Government Model College, Katlicherra, Hailakandi (Assam) India

## ABSTRACT

A study of the Bangladesh liberation movement calls for an examination of the socio-political background and some of the events that shaped the crisis in East Pakistan, out of which Bangladesh was born. It can be said that both 1947 and 1971 divulge the same historical experience for identical reasons. In 1947 United India was dismembered and Pakistan was created in response to the Muslim nationalist movement against the political domination and economic discrimination by the Hindus. In 1971, similarly Pakistan was disintegrated and Bangladesh emerged as a result of the Bengalee nationalist movement against the West Pakistan political domination and economic exploitation. Being the nearest neighbor and affected nation from the civil war of Pakistan, India played a gigantic role in the freedom movement of Bangladesh. India's role in the separatist movement of Bangladesh evolved around its declaratory concerns for the values of democracy, federalism and secularism on the one hand, and its foreign policy and geo-strategic perspectives on the other. India's involvement in the liberation movement of East Pakistan can be broadly divided into four phases: (a) Expression of concern and moral support; (b) Augmentation of moral support with military training to East Pakistan; (c) Diplomatic initiatives to bring about a political solution together with the intensification of military activities; (d) The Indo-Pak war leading to the emergence of Bangladesh. In this paper, a modest attempt has been made to understand India's involvement in the emergence and nation building process in Bangladesh.

**Key Words :** Bangladesh, Liberation, Movement, India, East Pakistan

## INTRODUCTION

One of the traumatic events of 1971 was the disintegration of Pakistan and the emergence of the new nation state-Bangladesh. In fact, Bangladesh has achieved its independence through a national liberation movement. Prior to its emergence, Bangladesh was called East Pakistan<sup>1</sup>-the eastern component of the Federation of Pakistan. The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign and independent state had great significance for various reasons both for the nations of the Indian subcontinent and for the international community.

### Analysis:

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some of the events that shaped the crisis in East Pakistan, out of which Bangladesh was born. It can be said that both 1947 and 1971 divulge the same historical experience for identical reasons. In 1947 United India was dismembered and Pakistan was created in response to the Muslim nationalist movement against the political domination and economic discrimination by the Hindus. In 1971, similarly Pakistan was disintegrated and Bangladesh emerged as a result of the Bengalee nationalist movement against the West Pakistan political domination and economic exploitation. Being the nearest neighbor and affected nation from the civil war of Pakistan, India played a gigantic role in the freedom movement of Bangladesh. India's role in the separatist movement of Bangladesh evolved around its declaratory concerns for the values of democracy, federalism and

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The Indian role was a major factor in the liberation of Bangladesh. India provided full support to the people of Bangladesh giving all kinds of assistance-moral, material and even military in their liberation movement. Actually during the liberation movement, many leaders went across the border. They were given asylum. It was to escape the inhuman torture of the Pakistan Army that the millions of people fled to the safety of the Indian border. Border skirmishes between Indian and Pakistan's Army became more frequent, severe and widespread. The Pakistan Airforce launched their pre-emptive air strikes against Indian airfields on 3 December 1971<sup>3</sup>. In retaliation the Indian Army invaded Pakistan on both eastern and western fronts.

### Implications:

India's involvement in the liberation of East Pakistan, can be justified on various grounds. In the first weeks after the liberation movement was set off, by the 'Operation Massacre'<sup>4</sup> launched by the Pakistani Army in East Bengal on March 25-26, 1971 the problem looked different. Gradually, it was felt that apart from the massive economic burden east on India, there was good prospects of creating tension between the fleeing people and local resident of the border districts of eastern India. This feeling was being reinforced by the National Convention of Minorities on Bangladesh which adopted a resolution in June 1971<sup>5</sup>. The resolution said, "the situation has been deliberately manipulated to create problems for our country resulting in the exodus of about 4 million people from Bangladesh within ten weeks<sup>6</sup>. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Indian Prime Minister in her message in the connection said, "when four million people are forced to flee their homes and their country and across into our territory through terror, obviously the matter can not remain an internal matter of Pakistan<sup>7</sup>." Furthermore, on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1971, Mrs. Gandhi told a meeting of economic editors that it had become the "tremendous

burden" on India- a burden no other country in the world had to bear at such a short time and on such a massive scale...."<sup>8</sup>

As the flow of refugees increased day by day, the then Defence Minister Mr. Jagjivan Ram in a statement on October 4, 1971 said, "By driving the refugees into India, Pakistan has committed an aggression which was more pernicious than an armed aggression.<sup>9</sup> Earlier Mrs. Gandhi on May 24, 1971, first used the expression Bangladesh. She also reiterated, "what was claimed to be an internal problem of Pakistan has also become an internal problem for India. Pakistan can not be allowed to seek a solution of its politics or other problems at the expense of India and on Indian soil.<sup>10</sup> India's secularism and communal harmony was being seriously jeopardized, At that situation, the Indian Prime Minister was right to warn the Rajya Sabha on June 17, 1971, that India might have to "go through hell<sup>11</sup> in the pursuit of its ideals and interests. Moreover, several international observers felt that, something must be done to remove the fear<sup>12</sup> from the minds of millions of refugees in India. All these events instigated India, the immediate neighbor to actively take part in the movement for freedom. India, being always a supporter of secularism and communal harmony could not allow a situation where people's life or freedom would be threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

India's stand on the issue was not baseless and unjustified from the historical perspective and analysis too. It is because, the history of the west Pakistan massacre in Bangladesh can be divided into three distinct phases. The first began in Dacca towards the end of March 1971<sup>13</sup>. Numerous eye witness accounts by foreign correspondents on the spot revealed that the west Pakistan troops went on a week-long rampage of murder and terror, mainly in Dacca. The second phase of the slaughter campaign started soon after the happenings in Dacca. This was when Islamabad decided that the best way to end the threat to its dominance over Bangladesh was to destroy or drive out entire section of the population that were sympathetic to the Awami League. This campaign was directed mainly against the territory's Hindu population. The third phase began around the time of the surrender of the West Pakistani troops to the combined forces of the Indian Army and Mukti Bahini in Dacca. The whole world felt that Bangladesh should fall under the category of crimes against humanity.

Bangladesh at the beginning of her birth was the product of secular nationalism based on culture and language and cherished the same ideals as India. Geographically Bangladesh is bordered on three sides by the Indian states of West Bengal on the west and north, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura on the North-east and east and by Myanmar towards the South. Unlike many countries which freed themselves from colonial rule through negotiation, Bangladesh had to achieve its independence through a bloody war. Excepting an old-colonial administrative infrastructure, the country received nothing substantive from the war-torn victory. There was no foreign exchange reserve, no central policy planning agency in respect of foreign relations, defences and economic planning. Above all the country faced the gigantic task of rehabilitation of about 10 million people who crossed into India for shelter during the war.

After birth, the main objective of Bangladesh was the reconstruction of the shattered economy and building a society that would be free from exploitation and misery. Bangladesh was aware that the foundation of national liberation movement was anti-imperialist and that no nation building activity was possible without countering the onslaught of imperialist powers. Thus Bangladesh spontaneously drew towards the policy of anti-imperialism and non alignment. Moreover, Bangladesh had to fashion her foreign policy with particular stress on India, because of her geographical situation, historical ties, cultural affinity and developmental problems. Nation building in any state has to be universal and democratic. Otherwise it tends to promote instability. The nation building processes in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Srilanka have been confronted by serious separatist challenges. In multi-ethnic societies one discerns two simultaneous and on-going processes of nation building. Firstly, the formation of an inter-ethnic composite of a homogenous national personality with a secular outlook through the state apparatus and secondly, the transformation of an ethnic group in a multi-ethnic society to an ethnic community to nation. The former can be described as the building of a state-centric nation. Nation building by the state can also proceed from two opposite directions. Either the whole population is considered as equal members of the nation or some cultural particularity shared by part of the population is selected as the basis of nation. Thus Bangladesh being a new nation had to take into consideration both the above theoretical and practical aspects of nation building.

### Findings:

Like many other new states, Bangladesh at its birth faced the formidable problem of simultaneously building an input and an output sector- both a state apparatus and economic sector were in disorder. It was really difficult for a poor country like Bangladesh to rebuild and reconstruct its administrative and finance sector without the help of an outside power. The immediate problems faced by the Awami League government can be summarised as follows:

Firstly, straightening the administrator.

Secondly, rehabilitating about 10 million refugees who were to return from India.

Thirdly, restoration of the law and order situation and handling of the freedom fighters.

Fourthly, restoration of roads, bridges etc.

Thus to counter these challenges and to rebuild the nation, Mujibur Rahman as the President of the Republic put priority on the political process itself. To provide a basic political framework for the state, Bangladesh initially adopted a constitution in 1972 that sought to direct the state power to develop ways and means for the society's transition to a socialistic economy. Examining these efforts it can be said that the people of Bangladesh under the leadership of Mujibur Rahman registered a landmark on their road to progress through their Constitution on Dec., 17, 1972.

The basic features and the activities of the Bangladesh regime at the beginning of the nation state building process were:

- (i) Nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism as the four pillars of state policy.
- (ii) Equality before the law irrespective of race, religion, caste or sex.
- (iii) Envisages people's control over means and instruments of production.
- (iv) State ownership of the key sectors of the economy and so on.

On the economic front specifically Bangladesh chose a non-capitalistic path of economic progress. As a result of it, the public sector emerged as the dominant force in the economy and the spread of capitalism in the agricultural sector was checked, worker's participation in the management was ensured and some of the key industries were nationalized like banking, jute industry and trade.

India as an immediate neighbor provided all material help such as food, funds, technical experts, construction

materials etc. in order to help Bangladesh to restore its shattered economy. Later this was acknowledged by Mujibur Rahman. He said that, “the Government of India had incurred an expenditure of rupees 350 crores towards the relief of the Bengalees who had taken shelter in India after Pakistan’s crackdown in March 1971. Besides, India had supplied 8 lakh tons of food grains to Bangladesh immediately after the liberation which had ensured the government of Bangladesh to tide over the acute food shortage in the country.<sup>14</sup>” This despite Bangladesh’s realization that, “if she continues to beg for its basic needs from the world, she will never be respected by any country<sup>15</sup>, she took all kinds of help and support from India. Perhaps Bangladesh considered India as an ‘old friend’ and thus showed her reliance on the latter.

From the Indian perspective it can be said that India definitively wanted India-Bangladesh relation to flourish on a firm note. The emergence of free Bangladesh government and a democratic country as our neighbor would make a lot of difference from the previous position of having an unfriendly regime staring at us. It had been obviously anticipated that a free and democratic nation would be an excellent neighbor. The cross-border ethnic affinities tended to provide a greater momentum to the efforts of the resistance fighters, in the case of India. Above all the emergence of Bangladesh was a political gain for India.

### **Conclusion:**

Analysing the above facts, one can easily say that the process of nation building in Bangladesh was bound to be complex and contradictory. It was such because the 1970s witnessed the crystallization of significant changes in the state-society dialectic in South Asia. It can be called populist politics<sup>16</sup> of the 1970s. One should note that the term ‘populism’ has been interpreted rather vaguely. Firstly, it depends on the personal aspects of a phenomenon. Secondly, the role of charismatic leaders is important. Thirdly, its appeal lay in its claim to give voice to the frustrations of the dispossessed and downtrodden. Finally, the aim of populist politics is to change and dent the existing structures of domination and privilege. And Bangladesh at the beginning passed through the process of populist politics under the leadership of Mujibur Rahman. It did not have any organizational cohesiveness. Mujibur Rahman like Mrs. Indira Gandhi of India and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan attempted to apply populist policies. But unlike her two

neighbours Bangladesh or Mujib in particular could not ignore the awesome constraints of a war ravaged economy and the diverse and conflicting social groups. Despite these, the first flush of independence propelled Mujibur Rahman to the ‘commanding heights’ of popularity<sup>17</sup>. As the fountain of authority he used his personal status to strike a balance between the conflicting social groups. Initially Bangladesh moved towards a system of parliamentary democracy. Among the populist economic measures notable were land reforms and nationalization of banks and few existing industries. The fact is that nation building includes not only economic development but goes far beyond to encompass the complex inter-related and inter-dependent changes in the society as a whole.

Indeed, during and after the liberation movement, the two nations, India and Bangladesh came closer to each other. Common heritage, geography, societal infrastructure, language etc. brought the two nations closer. India could not remain just merely as a spectator at the events across its borders. Moreover, the foreign policy of India has always been oriented towards the twin objectives of security and nation building. Non-alignment of which India has been the originator helps the activities of nation building which lay foundation for security also. When Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation through a national liberation struggle, it was consistent with India’s foreign policy perspective to help the new nation develop as a non-aligned, anti-imperialist political entity. India’s active participation in the economic development of Bangladesh in various ways helped the new nation to overcome initial problems. On the other hand from the Bangladeshi perspective, India occupied a place of honour as she was looked upon as the mainstay of Bangladesh’s liberation war. In other words, India can be considered as an inescapable determinant of Bangladesh’s foreign policy. It is so because, Bangladesh cannot ignore the reality of its geographical location which makes it a part of the sub-continent with India bordering on three sides and thus impossible to overlook the fact that the latter would always be a constant factor in the former’s foreign policy formulation.

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