

Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971: A Historical Study

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Abstract: In this research paper, an attempt has been made to look into the Liberation War of 1971. Is the country ready to negotiate with its history? In this Paper, I argue that the alternative versions of the 1971 liberation war, which contests the ‘official narrative, has to be debated; the 1971 liberation war and its ‘official narrative is a cause to alienation among various groups and rise of militancy in Bangladesh and; India and Pakistan, even they want, cannot de-link themselves from that war.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, six demands, 1974 tripartite agreement, war trials, Two Nation Theory, Bangali

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Even though by mistake, the vision of Bangladesh was foresighted in the All India Muslim League Resolution of March 1940, which is known as the ‘Pakistan Resolution’. In 1947, British India was partitioned on the basis of the two-nation theory. At that time, religious differences between the Hindus and Muslims were taken as the only denominator for the formation of a nation, and other primordial identity-related markers were either natively or deliberately ignored by the political leadership. After the formation of Pakistan, differences cropped up between its two wings – Eastern Pakistan and Western Pakistan. East

Pakistan had visible and perceptive differences from West Pakistan, which made the former imagine itself differently and also re-form a nation on a set of different identity markers. Language and dress code were two major day-to-day visible markers of differences between the people from the two wings of Pakistan. The first tension between the two wings emerged over the issue of giving national language status to Bengali in 1952, which was granted in 1955. The dress code especially of women – who, in a patriarchal society are considered as the preservers of society’s culture – also played an important role. In Bangladesh, women, even at present, wear sari and use flowers and teep

(bindi), which makes them resemble closely the Hindu women in the Indian state of West Bengal. The saris are also popular among Pakistani women, but for a substantial period of its history, it was considered by the state authority as the dress of Hindu women. General Zia-ul-Haq's administration strictly warned against wearing it. This was considered to be the dress of a vamp in many of the Pakistani television dramas of those days. During the Liberation War, Bengali women, most explicitly through their clothing (saris) and adornments [flowers, teep (bindi)], became the icon of Bengali ethnicity, a vehicle for marking cultural (and territorial) boundaries.¹ The dress code by Bengali women, and popularity of Rabindra Sangeet in East Pakistan put 'Islam in danger', the ideology on which Pakistan was created. This was why, a month before military crackdown began in East Pakistan, pointing towards a crowd assembled on the fringes of Jessore airport, Yaha Khan said to a handful of journalists 'Pahle inko Musalman Karo (First make them Muslim). The second theoretical aspect to look into the liberation of Bangladesh is what Ted

Robert Gurr (1970) has formulated as 'relative deprivation'. He defines it as the discrepancies between 'value expectations' (that to which one feels entitled) and 'value capabilities' (that which one is capable of achieving). East Pakistan was facing both political and economic disparities, which led Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to come out with six-point demands in 1967²:

1. The Constitution of Pakistan must be federal, with parliamentary form of government and a legislature directly elected on the basis of adult franchise.
2. There should be separate currencies for the two wings, freely convertible into each other.
3. Or, alternatively, one currency subject to statutory safeguards against flight of capital from the east to the west wing.
4. Power of taxation and revenue collection to be vested in the federating states; the centre to be financed by allocation of a share in state's taxes.
5. Separate foreign exchange accounts to be kept for East and West Pakistan, the requirement of the federal government to be met by the two wings in equal proportions or on any other fixed basis as may be agreed upon.

6. Self-sufficiency of East Pakistan in defence matters, an ordinance factory and a military academy to be set up in the eastern wing, the federal naval headquarters to be located in East Pakistan.

These six points were further increased to 11 demands by AL in 1969.³ Such discriminations had been also accepted by Mujibur Rahman's bête noire, Z.A. Bhutto. He said,

"East Pakistan, the producer of wealth, has become a rural slum. That Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has a just grievance with regard to the condition to which East Pakistan has been degraded cannot be denied..... Exploitation of the people is weakening national unity and creating severe tensions throughout the country.⁴ The clash was between Bhutto and Mujib, but more than the two, it was West Pakistan's political establishment versus the leader of East Pakistan. The power conflict between them created a political pandemonium which caused the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan.

Politically, the fissure between the two wings emerged in 1952. But, despite his disenchantment with the reality of Pakistan, Mujib backed H.S.

Suhrawardy in his quest for a role in national politics. Thus, when Prime Minister Suhrawardy assured the Bengalis that the Constitution of 1956 provided 98 per cent autonomy to their province, he quietly acquiesced.⁵ Nevertheless, like many Bengali Muslim politicians of his generation, Mujib hoped both to preserve the unity of Pakistan under a federal structure and to make a bid for national leadership by leveraging Bengali's potential electoral majority. West Pakistan's response to the cyclone in East Pakistan in 1970 was, in a way, public acceptance of political and economic discrimination of one province against the other. Later on, denial of an opportunity to form a government despite the AL winning majority number of seats was the beginning of the end of united Pakistan. The road towards separation began when the session of the assembly, scheduled to be held on 3 March 1971, was postponed. This created a series of impasse and no substantive political steps were taken to resolve them. Instead, military crackdown began on 25 March 1971, with the acquiescence of Lieutenant General Sahibzada

Yaqoob Ali Khan, Commanding Officer of the Eastern Comand (later martial law administrator from 7 March 1971 to 6 April 1971), and the Governor, Admiral Ahsan.⁶

Over the issue of military crackdown, while there were differences of opinion within the general officer corps on how to handle the military operation, there was consensus on the objectives to be achieved and strategy to be employed in what was called ‘Operation Searchlight.’⁷ First, the top leadership of the party had to be captured. The second priority was to neutralize its more radical elements, in particular the student leaders and organizations and various cultural organisations that advocated a Bengali renaissance. Leaders were to be arrested peacefully if possible, but if armed resistance was offered, troops were to respond with force. Third, the Bengali armed forces had to be disarmed and neutralized. The army assumed that the East Bengal Regiment, the East Pakistan Rifles, the Ansars and the police would all turn against the military authorities. Finally, the operation called for the establishment of control over all

communications media. It was on that night, before his arrest, that Mujib wrote a brief declaration of independence: ‘Today, Bangladesh is a sovereign and independent country... The Bengalis are fighting the enemy with great courage for an independent Bangladesh. May Allah aid us in our fight for freedom. Joy Bangla (Victory to Bangladesh)!’⁸ (This message was broadcasted by Major Ziaur Rahman from Kalurghat on 27 March 1971. He said:

“Major Zia, Provisional Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh Liberation Army, hereby proclaims, on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the independence of Bangladesh... The Government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the sovereign legal government of Bangladesh and is entitled to recognition from all democratic nations of the world.” The official version of the Liberation War presents Bengalis as victims, and any alternative view is countered, sometimes even through violent. The war between the two countries India and Pakistan and the defeat of Pakistan made the birth of Bangladesh a reality. Even today,

Pakistan alleges Indian conspiracy in the creation of Bangladesh. India engaged deeply in the Bangladesh issue after millions of refugees started crossing into its side of the border. India's then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in her speech said,

“What was claimed to be an internal problem of Pakistan has also become an internal problem for India. We are therefore, entitled to ask Pakistan to desist immediately from all actions which it is taking in the name of domestic jurisdiction, and which vitally affect peace and well being of our own citizens.”

On 6 December 1971, the Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi, in a letter to Tajuddin Amed, Prime Minister of Bangladesh government-in-exile, wrote, ‘I am glad to inform you that in the light of the circumstances which prevail at present, the Government of India has decided to grant the recognition.

It also helped that government to set up and prepare a guerilla force by providing training and arms. Earlier, the Government of India, officially, kept denying its involvement in that war, put in 2015, Indian Prime Minister

Narendra Modi accepted India's engagement in his speech at the Dhakja University.

Contemporarily, the 1971 Liberation War invokes the issue of migration from Bangladesh to India. As the Pakistan Army unleashed violence in 1971, according to the United Nations Human Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of people crossing into the Indian border was between 7.5 and 8.5 million (UNHCR, 1972). Initially, despite the financial burden of the refugee crisis and the growing realisation of its magnitude, the Government of India did not close its doors to the refugees¹⁰, but later on, especially after the end of the birth of Bangladesh, it became a contentious issue between the two countries. To settle down the issue in 1972 during India-Mujib pact, 25 March 1971 was marked as the cut-off point for entry.¹¹ Many of those who crossed into India till the cut-off date were provided with citizenship status, others were to be deported. This cut-off date was contested and challenged by the All Assam Students Union (AASU), which demanded 1951 as a cut-off point for entry. To address their

concerns, Illegal Migrant Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act was passed in 1983. Not happy with the tribunal's work, the Act was challenged in the Supreme Court (SC) of India by the AASU and others. As a result, the SC revoked the Act in 2005. After that, the Court ordered the government of the day to deport the migrants staying illegally in India.

Over this issue, violence too has taken place between the groups, the most dastardly being the killing of around 2,000 migrants in 1983 at Nellie, near Guwahati. Migration has been a prominent electoral issue in the Assam politics and has been exploited by all political groups for their benefit.¹² Not only in Assam and other adjacent north-eastern states of India, the issue is significant also for West Bengal with which the Bangladeshis identify themselves. When the migrants poured into West Bengal, they were initially supported, but later on they were not because of the differences between bhadralok and commoner expressed in terms Gothi and Bangal. In a violent accident on 26 January 1972, hundreds of migrants were killed by the police when they tried to settle

down in Marichijhapi inside Sunderbans.¹³ They came there from Madhya Pradesh (Indian state), where they were earlier settled down by the Government of India. The victims are still demanding justice, which the Trinamool Congress leader, Ms Mamata Banerjee, made an electoral issue in 2011 elections.

After the end of the Liberation War, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) charged the Pakistan Army with continuous raping, raping to death, murder after rape, enforced prostitution and the sterilization of women.¹⁴ But no ICT under the United Nations (UN) was set up to punish the perpetrators of ethnic genocide in 1971 because the international law on the crime of genocide came into effect only in 1988.

Conclusion:

This research paper has discussed the narratives of the 1971 Liberation War, which are a source of various social and political tensions and violence in Bangladesh. To suppress the debate, authoritarian voices are coming up in Bangladesh for a need to have a law against questioning the Liberation War.

This research paper also discussed debates related to the perpetrators of violence during the liberation war of Bangladesh. The Pakistan Army and its Bangladeshi collaborators unleashed the violence on Bengalis. The demand for Bangladesh was made to evolve a Bangla identity, which is an inclusive one, but over the years, it has turned into a 'homeland' for Bengalis. In India, the states having borders with Bangladesh still turn into a communal cauldron over the issue of migrants from Bangladesh. Although India and Bangladesh have finally settled down their boundary issue after they agreed to implement the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 2015, the issue of migration has still not being addressed.

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