



Fifty Years of Bangladesh, 1971–2021

Crises of Culture,
Development,
Governance, and Identity

Taj Hashmi

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ISBN 978-3-030-97157-1 e-ISBN 978-3-030-97158-8

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97158-8>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham,
Switzerland

Fifty Years of Bangladesh, 1971–2021

“As of today, it is the only historical sociology of Bangladesh illustrating the nation’s culture, development, governance, and identity crises from the perspectives of history, politics, sociology, and cultural anthropology. Excellent work.”

—Kamal Siddiqui, *Former Professor at the IDPM, Manchester University, UK*

“A must-read book to understand why 50 years after becoming independent, Bangladesh continues to be one of the most fractured countries in the world, its huge economic progress notwithstanding. Taj Hashmi has brilliantly examined the historical, political, economic, social and cultural contexts of Bangladesh’s disunity to conclude that it is still dysfunctional.”

—M. Serajul Islam, *Retired Bangladeshi Diplomat, Bangladesh*

“What a history Bangladesh has had in 50 years! Taj Hashmi captures it all in his beloved homeland! In his pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the soul he pulls no punches and critiques his “sonar Bangla” in the starkest terms but he remains optimistic and ever hopeful. In ten brilliantly and exhaustively researched chapters he covers all the nation’s fault-lines from its booming garment industry to its rural agricultural base, from its history under the Raj to its significant place in the 21st century global economy, from its Bengali and Islamic orientation to its Bangladeshi-Islamic identity, and from its reverence and criticism of its heroes from Pakistan’s founder Jinnah to Mujeeb and Zia and their descendants to the demographic and environmental catastrophes that beckon. It is thirty years since the erudite, well-travelled, and cosmopolitan Hashmi penned his *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, and over twenty years since his *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*. Scholars and the public will recognize and appreciate his frank assessment as much as some will find it challenging and uncomfortable. Everyone will benefit from his forthright comments on the global economy and its social, political, and economic impact: but “Culture Matters”.”

—Roger D. Long, *Eastern Michigan University, USA*

“The narrative sweep of this book covers Bangladesh’s political culture, development, identity, and governance over the last fifty years of its independence since 1971. This appraisal is reminiscent of Taj Hashmi’s

other recognized social history volumes on South Asia. I recommend this book for the fresh as well as the veteran readers of Bangladesh history.”

—M. Rashiduzzaman, *Professor Emeritus in Political Science at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, USA*

Fazlu, my childhood friend, perished with his entire family in 1971 but saved my life

Preface and Acknowledgements

“Freedom and slavery are mental states.”—M.K. Gandhi¹

“The truth which makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear.”—Herbert Agar²

This study is a sequel to my previous three works on Bangladesh: *Ouponibeshik Bangla* (Colonial Bengal), *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia* and *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*. Although the stories are different, there are thematic similarities between this study and the previous ones. All of them have in common peasants, peasant culture, discrimination against underdogs and abuse of human rights. The title of this study could be the what-went-wrong-syndrome of Bangladesh. This is a departure from almost all the traditional studies on modern and contemporary Bangladesh. Only a handful of works by scholars like Sarmila Bose and Yasmin Saikia are dispassionate, objective studies on Bangladesh’s Liberation War. This myth-buster sheds light on many known and unknown facts about the history, politics, society, and culture of the country. The country is not just another postcolonial counterpart of India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka; Algeria, Indonesia, Nigeria, Singapore or Vietnam. It became independent twice, once in 1947, and then again in 1971.

This historical sociology of Bangladesh is a myth-buster that sheds light on many known and unknown facts about the history, politics, society and culture of the country. Besides being a twice-born country—liberated twice, from the British in 1947 and from West Pakistanis in 1971—it is also an artificial entity suffering from acute crises of culture, governance and identity. The author of this study attributes the culture and identity crises to the demographic by-products of bad governance. In addition to being overpopulated, Bangladesh is also resource-poor and has one of the most unskilled populations, largely lumpen elements and peasants. According to Marx, these people represent “the unchanging remnants of the past.” The second round of independence empowered these lumpen classes, who suffer from an identity crisis and never learn the art of governance. The proliferation of pseudo-history about Liberation has further divided the polity between the two warring tribes who only glorify their respective

idols, Mujib and Zia. Pre-political and pre-capitalist peasants' / lumpen elements' lack of mutual trust and respect has further plagued Bangladesh, turning it into one of the least governable, corrupt and inefficient countries. It is essential to replace the pre-capitalist order of the country run by multiple lumpen classes with capitalist and inclusive institutions.

Since this work is the first of its kind concerning the country, no single volume on history, politics, cultural anthropology, sociology, development studies and economics is going to be a substitute, let alone a competitor, of this multi-disciplinary study. I have pointed out here as to how the divisive polity of Bangladesh has become a fractured one, fast destabilizing the country beyond one's imagination. Despite the high GDP growth (6–7 per cent) and the visible improvements in the infrastructure in and around Dhaka (although one rainy day virtually turns the over-populated tiny city's congested roads into waist-deep canals), the bulk of the population have remained poor, uneducated, backward and superstitious, while the country has remained very poor. Fifty years after the Liberation, the country is still among the four least developed countries (LDCs) from South Asia, along with Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal, and the forty-six others across the world, mostly from the Sub-Saharan Africa.

Bangladesh is one of the few countries that suffer from such a severe identity crisis and people behave so irrationally and erratically as one encounters there! Political leaders, economists and journalists in any LDC, but in Bangladesh, assert publicly that their nation has reached the same levels of development, growth and overall prosperity as Switzerland, Singapore and the US. As a final note, it is astounding but true that Bangladeshi football fans who support Brazil or Argentina attack each other violently during the World Cup, and some fans commit suicide after their teams lose. Bangladeshis are extremely opinionated. Thus, there is always a diametrically opposed set of opinions regarding everything: religion, their country's history, politics, political culture, economy and what lies beyond the first fifty years of its existence. Having grown up in the country myself, I can offer some insight on this topic.

In 1969, when I was a student at Dhaka University, I was actively involved in the anti-Ayub movement. In addition to being an eyewitness to the events leading to the massacre of the Bihari immigrants in East Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh following the brutal Pakistani military crackdown in 1971, I can dispel several popular myths about 1971. Less

than 1 per cent of my college and university friends and people I knew well ever crossed the border into India or became freedom fighters. While the pseudo-freedom fighters who never used a gun lived in safe havens in India, 20,000–30,000 ill-trained Bengali guerrilla fighters fought with vintage small arms. Although they were annoying to the Pakistani Occupation Army, they never played a decisive role in defeating the Pakistanis. Despite this, successive governments, leaders, intellectuals and laymen in the country cannot resist asserting in the most unequivocal terms that Bengali freedom fighters, *not* the Indian government and armed forces, played a decisive role in the Liberation of the country. There have been more pseudo-freedom fighters with ruling-party connections in Post-Liberation Bangladesh than anyone could have imagined. Not only did actual freedom fighters and pretenders receive accelerated promotions and privileges as government employees, but recently their children and grandchildren have been granted 20 per cent employment quotas. This could not be more immoral or divisive than anything else. Interestingly, Bangladeshis in general never acknowledge that India played the decisive role in liberating their country.

The publicity surrounding the “three million dead” figure in 1971 has made it seem unbelievable but it is true that I lost more friends and acquaintances in Bangladesh in the Covid-19 pandemic than in the Liberation War of 1971. If there had been three million Bengalis killed by the Pakistan Army and their associates in 1971 (denying this figure is a crime in Bangladesh today), they would have killed 500 in each of the twenty districts of East Pakistan every day. Dhaka University, the birthplace of the Liberation War, would have lost a few thousand students, teachers and employees, but only 150 were killed by Pakistanis. Dhaka University (and other universities, colleges, schools, shops and industries in East Pakistan) remained open during the Liberation War (March–December 1971), except for the first three and last two weeks. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi authorities, intellectuals or the general public have never acknowledged the mass killing of *Biharis* in East Pakistan, and Bangladesh, after the Liberation.

At Sirajganj, a small town in northern Bangladesh before the Pakistani Army entered the town on 27 April 1971, I lost many *Bihari* school friends, who were burned alive or brutally killed by Bengali lynching mobs. Fazlul Haq Qureshi was one of them. He saved my life the day before he was

killed along with all of his immediate family members. Almost 700 *Bihari* men, women and children met the same fate at Sirajganj alone, where I grew up.

Although I have not conclusively argued that the country has no better option or future in the coming decades to overcome the manmade and natural disasters, but in view of the drastic decline in the quality of education, the constant emigration of most of the employable graduates from the country and the massive plunder of wealth and violations of human rights by the ruling elites, bureaucrats, police, armed forces and even the judiciary, with impunity, one has reasons to worry about Bangladesh in the coming decades. As a result, ethical values have deteriorated among the vast majority of Bangladeshis, especially among the affluent, politicians, bureaucrats, police and judiciary, while religious obscurantism and intolerance have been steadily rising. Defenders of democracy and human rights in this country are subject to abduction, arrest, enforced disappearance or exile for speaking out against corruption and autocracy. Again, one has every reason to worry about the country because of the sharp polarization between the two major political parties, the Awami League (“secular Bengali nationalist”) and the BNP (“Islam-loving, Bangladeshi nationalist”), which has virtually fractured the polity of Bangladesh. There are other fault lines too, between the so-called pro- and anti-Indian people. The growing economic disparity between the proverbial “1 per cent” and the rest of the people has all the potential to destabilize the country for decades. One is not sure if the country is going to graduate from the LDC status in 2026.³ This writer, however, agrees with Willem van Schendel, who wonders if perpetual bad governance, poor resource management, the growing demographic pressure and their ecological consequences are likely to adversely affect Bangladesh in the coming years! He raises the pertinent question: “Is the delta headed for boom or bust?”⁴ Basically, the study illustrates Bangladeshis’ ambivalence about their past, present and future course, further compounded by their premodern culture and identity crisis.

I have discussed in the main text that the average Bangladeshi, regardless of their educational or economic background, represents a premodern, rural and peasant culture. Thus, their collective behaviour reflects their alienation from the state, corruption, lack of respect for others, unpredictability and violence. The disrespect they showed to Jinnah and

Mujib, two of their most celebrated heroes and icons during the 1940s and 1970s, is blatant. Although Bengali Muslims had contributed wholeheartedly to the transformation of East Bengal into East Pakistan in the 1940s, their progeny not only dismembered the “promised land” of their parents and grandparents, but, in the aftermath of the creation of Bangladesh, also wiped out virtually everything associated with Pakistan, even symbolically. As a result, they substituted names such as Jinnah, Iqbal and Liaquat Ali with those of Mujib and other Bengali heroes. Incredibly, even Mujib tolerated these unnecessary changes and even seemed to have enjoyed replacing Jinnah’s name (who happened to be his idol at the time) with his own as the new names of roads, buildings, parks and monuments across the country. The acts reflect Bangladeshis’ collective amnesia, political immaturity, denial of history and denunciation of their own past, as they once loved Jinnah and Pakistan. Paradoxically, they also know that had there been no Pakistan, there would have been no Bangladesh! Mujib was treated even worse than Jinnah. Among the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis, the brutal assassination of Mujib and most of his immediate family members went unlamented. Additionally, many Bangladeshis, including Mujib’s cronies and beneficiaries, also publicly celebrated his overthrow.

Last but not least, it makes one wonder if the overall degeneration process is reversible at all. Ordinary Bangladeshis are totally unaware of the impending catastrophic impact of global warming, which in the next 30–50 years will flood over 10 per cent of the delta’s landmass with salty seawater, leaving 18–30 million people in a state of landlessness and destitution. It is tragic that those who are aware of the impending disaster among sections of the educated Bangladeshis could not be more apathetic or fatalist in this regard.

Taj Hashmi
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About the Author

Taj Hashmi (aka Taj ul-Islam Hashmi) was born in Assam, India in 1948 and raised in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). He is fluent in multiple languages. He holds an MA and a BA (Hons) in Islamic History and Culture from Dhaka University, and a PhD in Modern South Asian History from the University of Western Australia; and did his postdoc at Oxford and Monash. A retired Professor of History, Islam and Security Studies at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in US, UBC in Canada and NUS in Singapore, he taught at several universities in the US, Canada, Singapore, Australia and Bangladesh. He is a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society (FRAS) since 1997. His key works include *Colonial Bengal* (in Bengali), *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh* and *Global Jihad and America*. Besides being an advocate for human rights, he is a public speaker and writes regular columns on Bangladesh, history, international affairs, Islam and politics.

Acknowledgements

I have too many debts and too many favour and gestures of love and kindness by individuals and institutions to acknowledge here, with regard to the completion of this work. I cannot thank my parents more for providing me the opportunity to pursue higher education, and above all, for teaching me all about willpower or the mantra of “you-can-also-do-it!” My extended family members in three continents and our daughters, Shakila and Sabrina, have inspired me in different ways to undertake this project to make myself and others understand Bangladesh from historical and sociological perspectives. It is no cliché to acknowledge in the most unambiguous terms the debt I owe most to Neelufar, my wife for the last forty-nine years, who inspired me most in the completion of this work. And I know, I can never repay her debt!

My work is a product of more than fifty years of my exposure to higher education, which involved systematic experiments with ideas and truths presented by my teachers, peers and colleagues at two of my alma maters, Dhaka University and the University of Western Australia. I am indebted to all of them immensely. I am especially thankful to my teachers, colleagues, peers and friends, who helped me learn new things and formulate new ideas about the history, politics, economy and collective culture of the people in Bangladesh and beyond. They include Professors A.B.M. Habibullah, Abdur Razzaq, Abdul Alim, Latifa Akanda, Sufia Ahmed, M. Mufakharul Islam, Ahmed Sharif, Badruddin Umar, M. Rashiduzzaman, Saaduddin Ahmed, Maniruzzaman Miah, Talukder Maniruzzaman, Ahmed Kamal, Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq, Peter Reeves, Hugh Owen, John McGuire, Kenneth McPherson, Andrew Major, Roger Long, Abdul Momin Chowdhury, Sirajul Islam, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Abdul Majed Khan, Abdul Majeed Khan, C.R. Abrar, Manzurul Mannan, Perween Hasan, Syed Serajul Islam, Nashid Kamal, Barun De, Ravinder Kumar, Tapan Raychaudhuri, Harbans Mukhia, Mushirul Hasan, Yasmin Saikia and Q.M. Jalal Khan. Among close friends, Luthfur Choudhury, Mustafa Chowdhury, Enam Chowdhury, Sajjad Hussain, Hasanat Husain, Tariq Jamil Khan, Ishtiaq Ahmed, Iftikhar Malik, Tariq Mahfuz, Syed Abul Hasnath, Kamal Siddiqui (PM Khaleda Zia’s Principal Secretary), M.G. Quibria, Ahmed Sofa, Ambassador Serajul Islam, Mumtaz Iqbal and Adil Khan inspired me to write this book in different ways. Special thanks go to Gowher Rizvi and

Marika Vicziany for arranging research fellowships at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University and the National Centre for South Asian Studies in Melbourne, respectively. Through these grants, I was able to collect useful materials and form ideas for my research work, including this book. I must mention Rashed Al Titumir; Mustahid Hussain; Mahfuzul Bari (Agartala Conspiracy Case convict); newspaper editors Enayetullah Khan, Mahfuz Anam, Nurul Kabir and Mahmudur Rahman; Tito Rahman; Kanak Sarwar and Nazmus Saquib in this regard. I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers for recommending the publication of this work. Last but not least, I cannot thank Palgrave Macmillan more for undertaking this project. I cannot thank more Elizabeth Graber, Vinoth Kuppan and other friendly and very helpful Palgrave Macmillan staff.

Toronto

16 December 2021

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¹ *Non-violence in Peace and War* (1949), vol. 2, ch. 5.

² *A Time for Greatness* (1942), ch. 7.

³ Usami Takashi, “Bangladesh—Graduation from Least Developed Countries Status and Its Implications”, RIETI—Research Institute of Trade and Industry, Japan, April 2021. <https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/publications/summary/21040015.html>.

⁴ Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 250.

1. Introduction

Taj Hashmi¹ 

(1) Hawaii, HI, USA

The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, de¹liberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.

—John F. Kennedy (Commencement Address at Yale University, 11 June 1962 <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/yale-university-19620611>)

Somebody should ask these hypocrites [Bangladeshi Muslims] if they could give one good reason for the separate existence of Bangladesh after the destruction of the two-nation theory. If the theory has been demolished, as they claim, then the only logical consequence should be the reunion of Bangladesh with India, as seems to be the positive stand of the Bangladeshi Hindus ... had Pakistan not been created then, Bangladesh too would not have come into existence now.

—Basant Chatterjee (*Inside Bangladesh Today*, S. Chand & Company, New Delhi, 1973, p. 155)

Keywords Political culture – Development – Governance – Identity – Peasants – Historical sociology – Precolonial – Postcolonial

The Unique Entity of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is not just another country in South Asia or the Third World. As with many poor, backward, fractured—and largely artificial—postcolonial nations like India, Pakistan and Afro-Asian and Latin American countries, Bangladesh is a corruption-infested country governed by an unaccountable

government. That is where the similarities end! From a number of perspectives, the country has a unique position among postcolonial countries. This over-populated nation-state is a “twice-born” nation-state, which was decolonized in 1947, and freed from the internal colonialism of Pakistan in 1971. A demographer’s nightmare, Bangladesh is home to more than 170 million people (half the US population) on a landmass roughly equal to the size of Iowa. The country is also prone to frequent natural disasters. Unless the world miraculously saves itself from the growing threat of global warming, in fifty years or so, Bangladesh’s densely populated coastline will submerge under the Bay of Bengal, resulting in the salinization of river water upstream and the permanent loss of thousands of hectares of arable land. Bangladeshi scholar Saleh Ahmed—who has performed an empirical study on global warming in Bangladesh—believes that “any change in expected weather and climate patterns will seriously reduce Bangladesh’s food security,” hindering the nation’s Sustainable Development Goals. He predicts that the apocalypse will become the new normal in Bangladesh.¹ Unless mitigating measures are taken, M.G. Quibria also predicts a dreadful ecological-cum-environmental nightmare for Bangladesh in the 2050s. In the country, around 1 per cent of arable land is lost every year due to urbanization, human settlement, road infrastructure, waterlogging, depletion of groundwater and soil fertility, salinity and riverbank erosion that spreads sand onto croplands upstream. The issue is likely to worsen with the continued rise in river water flows, following the increased melting of the ice in the Himalayas due to climate change.²

Quibria further argues:

When Bangladesh became independent, it was widely believed that economics would be the Achilles’ heel for the country, while politics would be relatively smooth going. There were both historical and cultural reasons for this optimism. Regarding politics, it was thought that democratic values were in the DNA of the people, as the birth of the country was the outcome of a bloody political struggle for democratic rights of its people Although the aforementioned conditions should be conducive to a flourishing democracy, things did not turn out as expected—hopes were dashed almost immediately after independence.³

Bangladesh is an “artificial state,” in league with India and Pakistan. It is a by-product of two Partitions, first in 1947 and then in 1971. Both the Partitions were avoidable. Hence the epithet, “artificial state!” Bangladesh suffers from a tremendous identity crisis and any coherent sense of direction. First, the bulk of the population (Muslims) adopted Jinnah’s Two-Nation Theory as a mantra of political freedom, economic salvation and social upliftment of the downtrodden (in colonial Bengal, Muslims and the poor were synonyms); the second time the same people believed in the primacy of their Bengali identity, and in the capacity to handle their own affairs independently. As their political geography changed dramatically, they registered their resentment against unknown and known hands pulling the invisible strings to keep them disempowered or away from their cherished goals. East Bengalis, who failed to achieve their promised utopias despite the two rounds of Liberation, have had a love-hate relationship with entities they themselves carved out of British India and Pakistan, East Pakistan and Bangladesh. Even though there is a proliferation of historical literature that emphasizes the importance of economic factors in the formation of Pakistan and Bangladesh, this writer believes ethnic pride, pride in one’s religion and the desire to preserve one’s identity played the most crucial role on both occasions in 1947 and 1971. One can recall that Indians’ fervent religious devotion and their desire to restore the legitimacy of the Mughal Empire were the main drivers behind the First War of Independence of 1857–1858 (“Sepoy Mutiny”). The Pakistan and Bangladesh movements both reflected Indian Muslims’ and East Bengalis’ aspirations for human dignity. For East Bengalis, neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh made economic sense in the long run.

There are diametrically opposite narratives about Mujib’s role in creating Bangladesh from the 1950s to 1971, just as there are divergent accounts of who killed Mujib and overthrew his government in 1975. Additionally, the post-Mujib era is not without contradictory stories and/or conspiracy theories. In this regard, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) massacre of February 2009 and the so-called 1/11 are examples. Therefore, conspiracy theories and politically biased stories have made it difficult to write an objective history of Bangladesh. It is not what various narrators think about events and people, but the reliability of data and the objective assessment of it that matters.

Culture

Since singling out the cultural factor of underdevelopment in Bangladesh, in historical and contemporary perspectives, is the cornerstone of this study, now it is another chicken-and-egg situation: if centuries of bad governance under foreign and indigenous rule first created the “culture of underdevelopment” or it was the other way around! The main focus of this study is the collective culture of the people—mainly their political culture—which has shaped the society, economy and politics of Bangladesh. As elaborated in Chap. 8, Perez de Cuellar has observed, “failures and frustrated expectations of development” give rise to cultural tensions, wars and authoritarian regimes, disrupting the development process itself. This work elaborates the Weberian concept that correlates development and social change with religion or culture of the people concerned; and what he has elaborated as “greedy adventurism” or the pirate mentality of ruling elites, and mass inertia, explain the overall backwardness of the country. This study has not only examined the “culture of poverty” emanating out of poverty, which Oscar Lewis studied in Mexico, but also demonstrated how that culture accentuated poverty in Bangladesh, by creating a subculture (or a cultural group within a larger culture) of its own. I believe this is pertinent to our understanding of “development” of “underdevelopment” (both are loaded concepts). I have argued that countries devoid of democracy, such as Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—despite their high GDP growth and per capita income—are still underdeveloped, and likely to remain so for many years. And, true democracy, ensuring the rule of law, and the freedom of expression, human rights and dignity, and equal opportunities for every citizen implies true development. I have challenged the Churchillian arrogant ethnocentrism that there could be no democracy east of Suez, as we know, Japan and South Korea, have been democracies for decades, and a few more are emerging across the Asia-Pacific region. So, I have argued that, given the right leadership, even Bangladesh could be a developed democracy. Although Plato has warned: “Those who are able to see beyond the shadows and lies of their culture will never be understood, let alone believed by the masses,” yet this study aims at showing things “beyond the shadows and lies” of Bangladeshi culture to make them understood and believable to the readers.

Due to the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis coming from the peasantry, the communal “moral economy” of the peasantry is characterized by isolation from each other and from the state, risk aversion, mutual mistrust and idealizing poverty, otherwise known as *mota bhat*, *mota kapor* (coarse rice, coarse cloth). Hence, the acceptance of subsistence living or poverty as preordained by God, or natural! Romanticizing about the past and idealizing (and even glorifying) poverty by the masses works as a safety valve against mass revolutions from the bottom. Historically, the mass acceptance of abuse of power, corruption and unequal treatment by their superiors by East Bengalis legitimized the “thousand years of foreign rule” until 1971. Things have hardly changed in the realm of the collective political culture of the people during the first fifty years of their Liberation. During the last decade of the period under review, they have mostly remained passive victims of autocracy—and even proto-fascist rule. The age-old collective experience of the people, which is about autocracy and the abuse of power from above, has fine-tuned the culture that legitimizes any wrongdoing by the superordinates. Therefore, in the absence of the Weberian “Protestant work ethic,” which encourages hard work, thrift and efficiency across the board in one’s career, the ruling elites and their cronies plunder national wealth with impunity in Bangladesh (including elsewhere in the Third World). Meanwhile, efficiency, growth and development, social and economic justice and fair distribution of opportunities have almost totally disappeared from the country. Finally, as the ancient saying goes, “a fish rots from the head down”—often attributed to Mao Zedong—the Bangladeshi society (at least since British colonial rule began) is “rotten” from top to bottom; the classes below the ruling and business elites (no longer two different entities) are equally devoid of ethical values. In fact, even teachers, professionals, judges, police and clerics engage in unethical practices. It is nearly impossible today to tell whether a cleric or devoutly religious person is ethical or free from corruption and vices. Bangladesh’s persistent dysfunctionality and backwardness have been the result of four characteristics of its collective culture: (a) ignorance; (b) arrogance/anger; (c) lack of ethics; (d) fatalism. Self-inflicted ignorance and centuries of exploitative foreign rule have turned the bulk of Bengalis into angry, fatalist, and suspicious of others at the same time.

Again, myths are integral to culture. Greek for speech, narrative, fiction, plot, myth is premodern people’s religious and secular/mundane discourse

to justify and propagate ideologies to maintain social order and legitimize political and religious structures. Modern myths are narratives about the virtues and vices of various cultures and beliefs imposed by certain ideologies to legitimize certain cultures and orders in the name of democracy, freedom, human rights, socialism, Islam or Hindutva. History and truth are often distorted by myths. Bangladesh inherited the culture of fostering myths mostly to legitimize the old social order by inventing myths about staging revolutions in the name of “Muslim” or “Bengali” homelands. In this way, the promotion of “new orders” of Islamic egalitarianism and Bengali brotherhood gave rise to hundreds of new myths that would legitimize Pakistan and Bangladesh, which were never historical inevitabilities, but by-products of Machiavellian politics. There are some similarities between the two, but that’s where the similarity ends.

Using “taboo studies” to shatter the “nationalist mythology” in Bangladesh, Sarmila Bose has defended her seminal work on the Liberation War of Bangladesh as a myth-busting exercise.⁴ Many educated Bangladeshis believe in fabricated data and statements, such as Dhaka University once being called the “Oxford of the East,” and many other bizarre stories. The myths of development and the alleviation of poverty are equally overpowering. Global media outlets, human rights organizations and activists have shattered many myths in government narratives about democracy, freedom and development in Bangladesh. In addition to Mujib’s dual role as Mazzini and Cavour of Bangladesh, there are myths that Bengali freedom fighters were the “determining factor” of the Liberation War, not the Indian armed forces. The myth about the freedom fighters’ “decisive role” in freeing Bangladesh is simply overwhelming. They also received preferential treatment in independent Bangladesh, including rapid promotion in their jobs and other perks. As of late 2021, pseudo or real “freedom fighters”—including their children and grandchildren—are being treated preferentially (a 20 per cent quota for most public sector jobs).

The most ridiculous myth about the Liberation War has been the number of total victims of the Pakistani military operations in Bangladesh. Since Mujib came up with the absurd figure of “three million dead” (as Bengali casualty figure in the Liberation War) soon after his arrival in London on 8 January 1972 from Pakistani prison, which would imply killing around 11,000 people per day by Pakistani soldiers during the nine-month-long Liberation War. Interestingly, neither Mujib had any plans to

declare the independence of Bangladesh after winning 160 out of the total 300 seats in the national elections in united Pakistan in 1970, nor did he ever declare the independence of Bangladesh. The myth about the so-called Declaration of Independence by Mujib on 26 March (through an EPR transmitter at the Head Quarters of the Pakistan Army controlled border security force in Dhaka) has become the official version of history. It is surprising but true that questioning the mythical figure of three million dead or Mujib's so-called Declaration of Independence are criminal offences in Bangladesh.

Sarmila Bose tells us why any Bangladeshi author as of 2011 (forty years after the Liberation) failed to produce any well-researched history of the War. She singles out “the only book on 1971 that stands out in terms of research, analysis and objectivity,” the volume by two American scholars, Richard Sisson and Leo Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (1991). She blames Bangladeshis' demonization of the Pakistanis as “villains” and their self-pity as “victims,” “often with scant regard for factual accuracy or analytical sophistication.”⁵ She has made another very damaging—nevertheless very accurate—observation about Bangladeshi intelligentsia's habit of not “cross-checking for facts or search for independent corroboration.” She thinks the “only-we-know-better” mentality of Bangladeshis is a hindrance to any objective history writing (on the Liberation War) in the country. She adds: “Even well-educated people often made no distinction between well-established events and the wildest rumours The worst were the ones, often in Dhaka or abroad, who had not participated or suffered directly in the war, but had ‘views’ nevertheless, never mind facts.”⁶

Yasmin Saikia's path-breaking book on women, the 1971 war, and the making of Bangladesh is another piece of objective scholarship. As part of this work, testimonies of both Bengali and non-Bengali rape victims are presented, showing that men on both sides of the war abused women. Bose and Saikia dispel myths and tell a different story about 1971, which Bangladeshi scholars have failed to tell so far.⁷ As elaborated in Chap. 2, Yahya Khan's affidavit confirms it was not Mujib but Bhutto who sparked Pakistan's disintegration.⁸

Governance

Good governance is needed in every form of government, whether monarchy, central planning system, mixed economy, free-trade democracy or market economy. It is an essential precondition for economic, cultural and social development. Therefore, good governance goes beyond bureaucratic or structural reforms of public administration, public policy or management. This process involves policymakers, scholars/experts, as well as the general public, especially in an LDC like Bangladesh. While inefficient and corrupt politicians and bureaucrats run Bangladesh, the bulk of the politicians being almost totally incompetent to manage any small enterprise let alone run a government, are being manipulated by corrupt and slightly more efficient bureaucracy. Despite being quite efficient (and some even honest), bureaucrats tend to report the most palatable things to ruling elites in order to keep their positions. Lastly, “overqualified” bureaucrats exploit “underqualified” politicians in the name of elected or unelected regimes. This has been the main bottleneck to good governance in Bangladesh.

The study juxtaposes problems of governance with those of development. Scholars agree that development cannot occur without good governance or a transparent and accountable system of government, which is synonymous with democracy. Democracy, we believe, is synonymous with development, and its absence signifies underdevelopment. Bangladesh, however, has become synonymous with bad governance during the past half-century. Perhaps Ziaur Rahman’s short tenure stands out from the long period of civil-military dictatorships, and they have also been corrupted and inefficient. The last twelve years under Sheikh Hasina, who came to power in 2008 through manipulated and doctored elections under a military-run, unelected government with external support, have been the worst in terms of governance. Even the two rounds of national elections in 2014 and 2018 were thoroughly rigged. The last round of elections on 30 December 2018 virtually took place on the night before. Ruling-party activists, with the active cooperation of police, armed forces and officials of the Election Commission, manipulated election results almost in every constituency in favour of the ruling Awami League.

The arbitrary arrests of dissidents, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings of opposition supporters, vote-rigging in favour of the ruling party, corruption and nepotism, and curtailment of freedom of expression all occurred alongside the Liberation and continue now. As with

all dictatorships in the world, “autocracy for development first, then democracy” has become a popular slogan in the country, especially since Hasina was re-elected as Prime Minister in 2009. There are certain characteristics of the national political culture that retard democracy and development and have been blamed for the state of bad governance as a result of this. As Hamza Alavi describes, Bangladesh is a typical postcolonial country suffering from colonial hangover, with an overdeveloped bureaucracy dominating an underdeveloped civil society, and the state as a whole.⁹ The empirical studies of Kamal Siddiqui and Jorge Barenstein on the problem of bad governance in Bangladesh have more or less corroborated Alavi’s classic essay on postcolonialism as a major cause of bad governance in the country.¹⁰ This study has, however, also stressed the importance of the political culture of the average Bangladeshis—which is all about the collective alienation of the people from the state and state machinery due to various historical factors—with regard to the perennial problem of bad governance in the country.

Of late, the country has become a one-party dictatorship, which is also very corrupt and repressive at the same time. As mentioned in Chap. 6, various international human rights organizations, such as the Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and, among others, Journalists Without Borders have been critical of the Hasina regime for enforced disappearances of hundreds of political opponents of the regime in Bangladesh. Paradoxically, the last ten years of the Raj (1937–1947), the British ensured a better rule of law and more freedom in what is Bangladesh today than Bangladeshis have had since Liberation. Bangladesh, an LDC with high GDP growth, is an autocracy with corruption, state-sponsored terror and human rights violations. Thus, the study examines the qualitative aspects of underdevelopment as well as cultural backwardness, which perpetuates bad governance. The country is engulfed in a vicious cycle of poor governance, cultural backwardness and growth without development. In sum, the very high level of “affective polarization” among followers of the two major political parties, the Awami League and BNP—which is least issue- or ideology-based but is reflective of Bangladeshis’ mutual mistrust and hatred—is a major hindrance of good governance in the country.

Underdevelopment or Growth Without Development

The Bangladesh government feeds Bangladeshis and foreigners manipulated or mythical statistics about GDP growth, per capita income, poverty, nutrition, freedom, human rights, prosperity and anything related to the human development index in the country to boost its image. As an LDC, Bangladesh belongs to a group of forty-six countries—four in South Asia, with Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal—and is likely to graduate in 2024 or 2026 in accordance with a UN report published in December 2020. Despite the country being an LDC, which is defined by income, education and vulnerability, it is being sold as a middle-income country by the Hasina Regime. Some over-enthusiastic supporters of the regime claim the country is as developed as the US, Switzerland and Singapore even though Bangladesh will not be a middle-income country before 2027.

Interestingly, by now there is sort of a consensus among leading economists and development practitioners that mere high GDP growth rate and the numbers of visible infrastructure development (high-rise buildings and improved communication networks, for example) do not tell us the whole truth about the level of development or underdevelopment, anywhere. Joseph Stiglitz argues: “Chasing GDP growth results in lower living standards. Better indicators are needed to capture well-being and sustainability While GDP is supposed to measure the value of the output of goods and services, in one key sector—government—we typically have no way of doing it, so we often measure the output simply by the inputs.”¹¹ Unless we focus on health, education and the environment, not only on material well-being, “we become distorted in the same way that these measures are distorted,” Stiglitz affirms yet in another piece of writing.¹² Jason Hickel also argues against measuring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) merely by the elusive “growth.” “Since 1980, the global economy has grown by 380 per cent, but the number of people living in poverty on less than \$5 (Pound Sterling 3.20) a day has increased by more than 1.1 billion So much for the trickle-down effect Instead of pushing poor countries to ‘catch up’ with rich ones, we should be getting rich countries to ‘catch down,’” Hickel argues.¹³

In spite of all the convincing arguments against the study's thesis of "mythical democracy and development," we must engage those who believe since Bangladesh is no longer under military rule, and no longer an "international basket case," it is a democracy and developed as well. There is no denying, Bangladesh has done reasonably good in many areas of development: lowering the rate of natal mortality, epidemics, population growth; and raising life expectancy, growing more food than ever before, raising per capita income, GDP, GNP, literacy rate, female empowerment and generating more electricity than ever before. Of late, Bangladesh has become the second-largest garment exporter in the world, after China. Here cultivators mostly use power tillers, not traditional ploughs and bullocks; and not wind or muscle-power but engines run country boats. One comes across good roads and housing, sanitary toilets and electricity in the countryside as well. The country has built bridges across big and small rivers; highways connect most small and large towns with the capital city; there are scores of public and private colleges and universities, including medical and engineering colleges. Last but not least, Bangladesh has a higher human development index (HDI) than India's and Pakistan's. So far so good!

However, what successive governments, as well as local and foreign development practitioners, may say regarding development in Bangladesh, things aren't as rosy as they might seem at first glance. There are reasons to worry about the immediate and long-term future of the country. Even questioning the viability of the country is not an out of the world type at all. Things went wrong and are going wrong in Bangladesh, with little or no sign of getting them right in the foreseeable future. And, people are getting nervous about the state of affairs in the country, economic, social and political. Hence the ongoing flight of capital to North America, Europe, Malaysia and Singapore; and an exodus of young (both educated and not-so-educated) from the country to wherever they can! Since the grossly rigged and farcical parliamentary elections of 30 December 2018, the bulk of the population is almost thoroughly de-politicized, disillusioned, frightened and confused about the present and immediate future course of action. Meanwhile, as of early 2021, the gap between the rich and the poor has been widening, while around 70 per cent of Bangladeshis live below the poverty line. By the way, there is absolutely no reason to believe in the ADB drawn poverty line, which is around US\$2 per capita per day on PPP.

As of 2021, one needs the equivalent of at least US\$5 per day to live above the poverty line in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the state-sponsored propaganda of phenomenal growth and development has become so overpowering that many ruling-party supporters argue that economic growth is more important than democracy.

Interestingly, there is a convergence of opinion between Sachs and Yunus about the root causes of poverty. The former believes “poverty is a result of corrupt leadership and retrograde cultures that impede modern development,” the latter blames governments and banks who think the poor are not creditworthy. Yunus believes financial institutions should be “people worthy” in order to eradicate poverty once and for all. Both of them believe the empowerment of women is a major step towards alleviating poverty, and eradicating it altogether, one day!¹⁴ However, the microcredit-centric poverty alleviation approach is problematic. “Social Business” activities by NGOs and microcredit institutions like BRAC and Grameen Bank in Bangladesh sound wonderful, but in-depth studies of these organizations reveal somewhat disappointing and shocking results. They are profitmaking business enterprises with generous financial and moral support from the World Bank, IMF and mega-corporations and banks in the West. People like Bill and Hillary Clinton have further glorified them to such an extent that any counter-argument or results of intensive research that project their loopholes and limitations are scandalous blasphemies among economists, development practitioners and donors. Another over-glorified, “female-empowering”—hence “poverty-alleviating” and “growth-generating”—sector is the readymade garment factories in Bangladesh. The beneficiaries of cheap apparel in the developed world frequently glorify the garment factories in the country, which are actually sweatshops that exploit slave labour of poor women, each making less than US\$3 per day. Paradoxically, Jeffrey Sachs (among others) believes microcredit and garment factories in Bangladesh are agents of female empowerment and economic development.¹⁵

The concept of “development of underdevelopment,” as used in this study, is borrowed from Andre Gunder Frank, which is all about the perpetuation of underdevelopment or “lumpen development” of colonial and postcolonial Third World countries by the metropolitan capital in collaboration with the unethical *lumpen bourgeoisie* in those places and Alan Winter.¹⁶ Without challenging the neo-Marxist dependency theory,

this study focuses on the internal dynamics of underdevelopment in Bangladesh by imputing the phenomenon to the people's belief systems or culture which collectively promotes *lumpen development* under the *lumpen bourgeoisie*. Underdevelopment in the Third World can be attributed to colonialism and neocolonialism. According to the study, Third World lumpen bourgeoisie on one hand protect neocolonial interests—which are mutually beneficial—while on the other hand nurture lumpen development through corrupt laws and institutions. Lumpen bourgeoisies and proletariats being consolidated at power in Bangladesh is the core of the problem.

Paradoxically, while GDP growth rate and human development index (HDI) have risen to record high—higher than India's and Pakistan's—Bangladesh today has virtually become unlivable, especially for the poor and marginalized. As we know, the polity is sharply polarized between the so-called pro-Pakistani/anti-Liberation/Islamist and pro-Liberation/pro-Indian/secular people. While roughly half the population admires Ziaur Rahman (Zia) (1936–1981), the other half admires Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib) (1920–1975). However, there is nothing permanent about mass commitment and loyalty to leaders or ideologies. As Gustave Le Bon has put it “The masses have never thirsted after the truth. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.”¹⁷ So long as Mujib supplied them with illusions, Bangladeshis were with him; and when he was seemingly failing to deliver any more illusions, they just abandoned him.

Identity

Bangladeshis suffer from an identity crisis in general. Bangladesh's majority Muslim population (90 per cent of the population) is unsure about whether Bengali, Muslim or Bangladeshi identity stands above others. While many Bangladeshi Muslims, despite being proud of their national identity, are unsure whether they are primarily “Bangladeshi Muslims” or “Muslim Bangladeshis”; likewise, many Bangladeshi Hindus are torn between loyalty and identity between Bangladesh and India. One may understand the inherent reasons behind these split identities/loyalties among Hindus. The reason may be explicable by the fact that Bangladeshi Hindus were marginalized for decades as citizens of both Pakistan and Bangladesh. They suffer from some inexplicable insecurity. Some Bangladeshi Muslims

believe they were duped into joining Pakistan by non-Bengali leaders—Jinnah and his associates—while Mujib and his lieutenants finally liberated them. And the assiduously fed lies and half-truths about the transformation of East Bengal into the eastern wing of Pakistan during the Pakistan period (1947–1971) had alienated many Bangladeshis from the concept of Pakistan. Mujib often fed the people a biased and a fabricated version of history by either extolling himself as the key figure in the Liberation War or singling out his Awami League party as the only factor that contributed to Bangladesh. Consequently, most Bangladeshi youths have hazy to distorted ideas about the history of their country. Bangladeshis born between the late 1960s and the 2000s, who are the bulk of Bangladesh’s population born between 1960 and 2000, are almost totally ignorant of their country’s history because Mujib’s legacy is propagated by the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina. A rural, peasant-working-class culture arose in the Post-Liberation era with the ascendancy of small-town and rural lower-middle and peasant-working-class people to the altars of power. In any case, long before Pakistan or Bangladesh even existed, educated Bengali Muslims began asserting their Muslim identity as a means of differentiating themselves from the more advanced Hindu Bengalis. They disowned “Hindu” clothing, customs and symbols by the early twentieth century. The role of Muslim leaders, mullahs and even academics played a significant role in this regard. In the 1930s, as the Provost of Salimullah Muslim Hall at Dhaka University, the well-known Bengali Muslim professor Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah (1885–1969) reportedly persuaded Muslim students to wear pyjamas and trousers instead of dhoti (considered a “Hindu attire”).¹⁸

After the Liberation, intra-ethnic conflicts among Bengali Muslims, mainly based on broad political differences, have been a major source of instability. They are also good at playing the blame game against the ubiquitous “others,” for all the right and wrong reasons. They are corrupt, lack mutual trust and respect, and are alienated from the state. An Awami League supporter believes Mujib and his successors (his blood relatives) have been the only patriots, hence only legitimate rulers, whereas the BNP supporter believes Zia and his successors (also his descendants) have been the only patriotic people. Thus, besides their communal identities as Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian, Bangladeshis are also divided into political lines. Their political commitment reflects more of their deep-

rooted patron-client relationship—common to all pre-capitalist or peasant communities—than any long-lasting ideological commitment to any political party.

Nations are imagined communities as Benedict Anderson has argued persuasively,¹⁹ and we also know that individual groups are often identified with individual heroes, ideologies, religions, languages, ethnicities and other identities, which can be pretentious and dangerous. It is important for us to be cautious about showing the world what we pretend to be. There are examples of fractured and potentially fractured nations, from Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, and from Iraq to Syria and Turkey. Bangladesh is a case study in this regard. Since 2014, the country is no longer even an “illiberal democracy.” It is divided by religion, ethnicity (especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts) or pseudo or pretentious ideologies such as pro- or anti-Liberation, secular or Islamic. As a result of myths—and the creation of new myths—the perennial identity crisis in the country is divisive and deadly. Overall, Bangladeshis represent a fractured polity in terms of their identities. In addition to their class, ethnic and religious differences, people here are divided politically and ideologically as well. Similarly, Bangladeshis, in general, are divided between supporters of two major political parties—the Awami League and the BNP—but Bangladeshi Muslims are again split between relatively secular and Islam-oriented ideologies. Despite the fact that most Bengalis are loyal to Bangladesh, there are some who maintain extra-territorial loyalty to India. These marginal groups seek a merger of Bangladesh and India to undo the Partition of 1947, which divided the Indian Subcontinent and Bengal.

In sum, while politicians, businessmen, the public and private-sector employees in the country are among the most corrupt in the world—this author’s own survey among Bangladeshis at home and abroad in social media on the perception of the level of corruption among Bangladeshi politicians, businessmen, professionals and government employees have revealed that around 95 per cent of them are absolutely corrupt—no economic miracle without good governance can ever emerge out of an absolutely corrupt society. The culture of hypocrisy and hyped-up “patriotism” are also integral to Bangladeshi culture. Massive corruption and hypocrisy at every level explain why despite the two rounds of independence—in 1947 and 1971—Bangladesh still suffers from the acute crises of culture, governance, development and identity. Plato seems to have

the last words in this regard: “Those who are able to see beyond the shadows and lies of their culture will never be understood, let alone believed, by the masses.” The people concerned are not going to be convinced so easily about the drawbacks in their culture, which includes their belief systems, mode of conduct, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, superstitions and, above all, vainglorious boast of personal or collective infallibility.

Transcending History and Sociology

We need to understand why despite the two rounds of independence, in 1947 and 1971, Bangladesh still suffers from acute crises of culture, identity, governance and development. I have looked into the state of the dysfunctionality of Bangladesh in the light of the history of the British colonial and Pakistani periods in general, and what ensued during the first fifty years of independent Bangladesh. During the first fifty years of independence, a new economic stratum and social stratification have evolved in Bangladesh. Nouveau riche industrialists, businessmen and political elites have replaced the traditional land-based and bureaucratic elites of erstwhile East Pakistan.²⁰ While history and empirical research on the past and present take us quite close to the problem, historical sociology takes us to the core of the problem. While historians do not have the freedom to reconstruct an alternative scenario to any historical event—they do not have the time machine to tell us what could have happened differently—historical sociologists have the leverage to do so. It tries to answer the whys and hows of social changes, and makes some predictions, in this regard. As Peter Turchin argues: “One of the hallmarks of a mature discipline is its ability to make predictions that can be used to test scientific theories. Scientific predictions do not necessarily have to be concerned with future events; they can be made about what occurred in the past.”²¹ Actually, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and others have seen sociology as integral to history to explain social changes, including revolutions and anarchy. We may agree with Richard Lachmann that historical sociology is a “way of doing sociology that recognizes change as the true subject of the discipline.”²²

The case study of Bangladesh is an attempt to explain postcolonial countries, ravaged and ruined by colonial rulers, who not only stole their

wealth and resources, but also destroyed their culture that had led to material and human development, and obliterated their dignity, self-respect, mutual love, respect and trust for each other. People in most postcolonial countries along with victims of slavery and apartheid in the United States and South Africa, for example, are victims of history. During the last millennium, the Palas, Senas, Turks, Afghans and Mughals were rulers of Bengal. However, unlike the British rule, they were not colonial empires as they did not have any metropolis outside India, as the British had in London, where they siphoned off assets from the Indian colony, and exploited India as a source of cheap raw materials, unfinished products and as a market to dump their finished products. Again, although the British were much more exacting and exploitative than most previous rulers of Bengal, paradoxically, they also replaced elements of primitive and medieval superstitions, and premodern values and institutions by modern, capitalist and quasi-democratic ones, albeit under the not-so-benign umbrella of Pax Britannica. Then again, postcolonial Bangladesh (through a quarter-century of Pakistani domination) suffers from a colonial hangover. It has nominally elected or unelected “people’s representatives” who behave like colonial rulers.²³

Once again, East Pakistan was not a colony of West Pakistan. Bangladesh was actually the result of a civil war and a Liberation War between two wings of Pakistan. Because of collective amnesia, Bangladeshis and people outside the country tend to forget that the civil war and unilateral declaration of independence began on March 1, 1971, and not after the Pakistan Army started killing Bengalis on March 25, 1971. The rationale for the secessionist movement put forward by Bengali politicians, economists, intellectuals and students as “growing disparity” between the two wings of Pakistan to the detriment of East Pakistan does not hold water. Interestingly, between 1966 and 1971, the disparity between East and West Pakistan, which was also a consequence of several historical factors, was actually declining while the secessionist movement in East Pakistan gained momentum. In particular, after the Third Five-Year Plan of the Government of Pakistan (1965–1970), the disparity decreased. So much so that according to the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1970–1975), as approved by the National Economic Council of Pakistan, East Pakistan received 60 per cent of the money allocated to the public sector against 40 per cent for West

Pakistan. East Pakistan was supposed to receive Rs. 29,400 million, while West Pakistan was allocated Rs. 19,600 million.²⁴

Again, the war between Pakistan and India, as well as the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union, are often overlooked aspects of the conflict. Its Post-Liberation experience has been just as hard for its people as its traumatic birth. After being dismissed by Henry Kissinger as an “international basket case” in 1974, two Western scholars assessed Bangladesh’s development process as a “test case.”²⁵ As one Bangladeshi scholar has aptly described the issue:

An appreciation of the challenges and choices facing Bangladesh—potentially a grim microcosm of the planetary future—resulting from a work of this genre is perhaps the most apparent benefit to flow from it. If Bangladesh succeeds and survives its myriad demons, there is hope for humanity on this increasingly fragile earth. The alternative does not bear contemplation.²⁶

Politically motivated historiography is just as misleading as manipulated statistics for assessing GDP growth. We have at least two diametrically opposite narratives about what has happened since 1947, especially since 1971. Glorifying and demonizing Jinnah and Mujib are two important aspects of these narratives. However, one may rely on objective and factually correct works by competent scholars like Badruddin Umar, G.W. Choudhury, Emajuddin Ahmed, Talukder Maniruzzaman, Sarmila Bose, William Milam and Basant Chatterjee, for instance.²⁷ Both supporters of the Awami League and Mujib believe Chatterjee has a prejudice against Mujib and the party. Their gloves have come off to attack Sarmila Bose for questioning Mujib’s mythical figures of “three million martyrs” in the Liberation War and Mujib’s over-exaggerated role in that war. The Bangladeshi culture, which celebrates myths and heroes like Bhashani, Mujib, Zia and their successors, makes it almost impossible to get any positive feedback on this study from the average Bangladeshi reader. Books questioning the heroic roles played by political idols, and even adverse criticism of their misdeeds, get banned from Bangladesh not infrequently. Bangladeshis in general are inherently anti-democratic and intolerant people. They also despise secularism and liberalism. They are so intolerant of dissenting opinions and so fond of ultra-conservative and dogmatic

mullahs that Taslima Nasrin and Daud Haider were forced to flee the country for their blasphemous writings. Several Islamophobic writers were hacked to death in the recent past as well.

According to the study, the emergence of Bangladesh was not an end to Jinnah's "Two-Nation-Theory" nor did it lead to the victory of secular Bengali nationalism over traditional "Muslim Bengali nationalism." Had this been the case, Bangladesh would have become part of the Indian state of Paschim Banga (West Bengal), just as it was prior to the Partition of 1947. One, however, is aware of a segment of the population in Bangladesh who believe Greater Bengal as an Indian province or as an independent entity. This explains the never-ending tussle between the adherents of the so-called Islam-loving Bangladeshis and secular Bengalis across the country. This ideological conflict is Achilles's heel of Bangladesh, which also reflects the average Bangladeshis' acute identity crisis. They can neither deny that their ancestors wholeheartedly supported Jinnah and created Pakistan, nor deny that although the emergence of Bangladesh was necessary, its merger with India would not possibly be the best option for them. However, a tiny minority of them want to de-Islamize the political system or even subsume Bangladesh under India under the banner of secularism. In short, Bangladesh has stagnated and even regressed culturally.

Furthermore, we believe the reasons for countries stagnating and even regressing are not due to economic factors, but rather cultural traits. This study aims to understand the issue of underdevelopment not only as Gunder Frank and Alan Winter have portrayed poverty and the culture of poverty but also with the hindsight of a social historian and the magnifying glass of an anthropologist to study the situation in Bangladesh. It is about understanding why it is so hard to change the "peasant mindset" of people or make them psychologically and emotionally leave their "ideal" *gemeinschaft* to become urbane through adopting *gesellschaft* culture. As argued in Chap. 9, understanding William Kornhauser's "mass society" is very useful to understand the Post-Liberation Bangladesh, where people are more or less "homogenized but also disaggregated because it is composed of atomized individuals."

Although Bangladeshis tend to disagree on the least contentious and unnecessary issues, such as the founding father, this study indicates that Bangladeshis are most unaware of the ecological and economic challenges

they will face in the next fifty years or even sooner. There is no long-term strategy in place to improve Bangladesh's education system, which has virtually turned it into one of the world's most intellectually backward countries. Bangladesh has no university among the top 500 in Asia—while another LDC—Nepal has two. Thanks to the very low standard of education—mainly due to massive “vernacularization” in the language of Oliver Roy, tens of thousands of skilled foreign and Indian nationals work in the private sector across the country. Bangladesh pays around US\$5 billion to Indian workers annually, reveals Manzur Ilahi, a renowned Bangladeshi entrepreneur.²⁸ Seemingly, no government since the introduction of garment factories and accelerated “manpower export” to get foreign remittance under the Zia administration (1975–1981) has taken any major step to diversify the sources of the GDP/GNP growth. Meanwhile, changes in expected weather and climate patterns, along with the annual loss of around 1 per cent of arable land due to various factors are most likely going to seriously reduce Bangladesh's food security. Within less than another fifty years, these cataclysmic changes are likely to occur. Furthermore, a great deal of the population remains semi-educated and unskilled, a *gemeinschaft* (rural community) or “mass society” as described by Tonnies and Kornhauser respectively.²⁹ Thus, people belonging to rural communities and mass societies (not urban societies) are primarily pre-political or violent; lack mutual trust and respect; are clannish, least interactive, least innovative; and distrustful of outsiders and each other. Many of them are similar to Hobsbawm's “primitive rebels,” or Marx's “sack of potatoes,” who are alienated from the state, having no sense of belonging to anything larger than their own locality, village or district.

Nevertheless, the history of Bengali Muslim peasantry is replete with examples of politically inert peasants turning into “primitive rebels” whenever they believed the state authorities or the government had ceased to exist or their days were numbered. Thanks to 1000 years of foreign rule, the peasants and working classes (or landless peasants) in Bangladesh have always considered the state or government to be an alien, extortionist and oppressive entity. *Swadhinata*, or freedom, as understood by peasants, is not so different from the state of nature, where they do not pay taxes to any authority and whatever they produce brings in a good price whereas whatever they consume should be available at a nominal price. This utopia

is integral to the collective psyche of the poor peasant and working classes in Bangladesh.³⁰

According to the study, Bangladeshis who were politically active prior to the Liberation War in 1971, and thereafter until the overthrow of Mujib's one-party rule in 1975, have either become politically inert or have become blind followers of their patrons. The reason is not far to seek. With the introduction of electoral politics in 1991, Bangladeshis have become supporters of parties X, Y and Z, whether by default or by design. This coincided with the rise of the rich-powerful-corrupt triad as leaders of various political parties. Most political parties in the country have turned into "coalitions of factions."³¹ The bulk of rich, powerful, corrupt politicians do not adhere to any ethics or ideologies. The ascendancy of the less qualified people in every sphere of society, including the administration and educational institutions began with the Partition of 1947 after the massive emigration of qualified Hindus from East Bengal to India. The process was further intensified after the emergence of Bangladesh, more so after the introduction of Bengali as the official language and the consequential neglect of English language in the 1990s. There was also a simultaneous rise of people from lower-middle and lower classes (Marx's "lumpen" classes) with very weak or non-existent ethical codes and moral behaviour. Olivier Roy has classified these people as "vernacular elites" who have emerged in several postcolonial countries introducing premodern or pre-political violent methods (including Islamist extremism) in the arena of politics.³² Consequently, there is hardly any meritocracy or upward mobility for people who are not part of the ruling parties, so the ranks of all political parties are swollen with lumpen elements. There are some people who are fighting each other in the name of fake ideologies, for example, "restoring the spirit of the Liberation War" or "defending Bangladesh's sovereignty and integrity"—either to survive politically or to grab power to rob the nation.

Bangladesh has also been a predatory state. Mujib's predatory classes were primarily civilians, while Zia and Ershad created a civil-military oligarchy to maintain law and order, develop the country and defend the country's sovereignty. Since 1991, successive governments have ardently followed the formula. Bosse Kramsjö (a Swedish development practitioner) draws an abysmal picture of the predatory and parasitical lifestyle of elites and middle classes in Bangladesh in his study of problems of development

in Bangladesh. He believes the arrogant, self-glorifying elites of Bangladesh have contributed to the “uncontrolled” growth of Dhaka city, which he describes as a “dynamic chaos.” And that the rich Bangladeshis who need the poor to work for them—to cook their food, wash their clothes, work in the garment factories, construct buildings, pull rickshaws and drive their vehicles, for a pittance—have a tremendous bias against the poor. Many poor in the country live on the leftovers of rich people. He believes many poor people in the country are just bonded labours, which is a “kind of slavery.” Even the *Dubai-wallahs* (Bangladeshi labourers who work in the Middle East) are not totally free from bondage. People in rural Bangladesh, around “twenty-five per cent of them never see a doctor during their lifetime,” Kransjo affirms.³³ As M.G. Quibria believes robots, such as Sewbos or Sewbots, are going to replace tens of thousands of Bangladeshi garment factory workers within twenty years or so,³⁴ Kransjo also believes that millions of Bangladeshi garment factory workers could become unemployed overnight as the garment export-oriented economy of the country balances “on an extremely fragile foundation.” He thinks: “In one blow vital parts of the hopeful garment sector can be wiped out.”³⁵

In addition, the non-peasant classes that emerge from the peasantry are primarily members of certain petty-bourgeois or lower-middle classes, which Marx regarded as the most counterrevolutionary, anti-people and lumpen elements. And, the class of tycoons in the country have mostly emerged from the politically empowered lumpen petty bourgeois and peasantry with new-found jobs and business opportunities, which sometimes come as a windfall in the wake of political upheavals and revolutions. They are the most ambitious, corrupt and ruthless people, desperate to plunder and display their newly grabbed wealth and power. They run political parties, business farms, industries, garment factories, clinics and hospitals, private schools and universities, head the police, bureaucracy and military. These nouveau riche people—the “peasants in a business suit”—are important subjects of this study. They virtually run Bangladesh by overpowering the executive, judiciary, military and civil administration. They have the “lumpen mindset” having little or no respect for the law, and anything that hinders their pursuit for primitive accumulation of wealth by any means. How long this retrogression survives or kills the polity at the end of the day, is the question!

Chapters' Breakdown

The following are the eight core chapters of the work:

Chapter 2, “Why Bangladesh? A Prehistory up to the Rise of Mujib, 1757–1963,” describes how several internal and external factors, both within unified Pakistan and its eastern wing, and beyond the boundaries of the two entities, Pakistan and East Bengal/East Pakistan, played decisive roles in the creation of Bangladesh between 1947 and 1971. While West Pakistan’s alleged and actual discrimination against the eastern wing of Pakistan alienated the majority of East Bengalis, certain pro-Liberation elements in East Pakistan had been determined to separate the eastern wing of Pakistan from Pakistan. Bangladesh was the result. India, Pakistan’s archenemy that aimed to weaken Pakistan, played a crucial role in Bangladesh’s creation, perhaps a decisive one.

Chapter 3, “The Rise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 1963–1971,” examines Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s political ascendancy as the sole spokesman of Bengalis in East Pakistan during 1963–1971. It provides a historical and sociological account of Bangladesh that focuses on the role that Mujib played in liberating the country after he took charge of the Awami League, which was the vanguard of the Liberation movement. The chapter summarizes Mujib’s noncommittal demagoguery, which cemented his position as East Bengal’s most important leader. Ironically, despite his opposition to the separation of East Pakistan from Pakistan, he became the “father of the nation” of Bangladesh, mainly by default. What was decisive in this regard, his charisma or his ability to influence people and entities having conflicting interests?

Chapter 4, “The Decline and Fall of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 1972–1975,” covers the period immediately following the Liberation under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Prime Minister and President between 1972 and 1975. Mujib and his team of administrators, possibly not being prepared to run a war-ravaged country with a lack of experience and skilled human resources, possibly could not do any better. This was further exacerbated by rampant corruption and the lack of a sense of belonging to the country among most ruling elites, professionals and businessmen. The introduction of the four-pronged State Ideology by Mujib, Nationalism-Democracy-Socialism-Secularism—known as *Mujibbad* or Mujibism—confused people at home and abroad as to what the new ism was all about. The state

capitalism sold as “socialism” gave a whole new meaning to the concept, and it paved the way for the violent overthrow of the Mujib regime.

Chapter 5, “Trial and Error, Hope and Despair: Bangladesh Under Zia and Ershad, 1975–1990,” gives a brief historical-sociological account of the society, politics, culture and economy of Bangladesh in its Post-Liberation period during 1975–1990, under two military rulers of the country, Zia and Ershad. The birth of Bangladesh, being a “historical accident” like that of Pakistan—historians impute the “accidents” mainly to Bhutto’s and Nehru’s intransigence, respectively—gave birth to many excuses in defence of the gross mismanagement of the country following its traumatic birth. While the gap between the rich and the poor is widening fast, the country mainly depends on hardworking peasants, very poorly paid garment factory workers and the unskilled workers’ remittance from the Middle East and Southeast Asia. One is not sure how long this will sustain. And, this is the sad conclusion of this chapter.

Chapter 6, “Dynastic Democracy” Under the “Battling Begums,” 1991–2021, appraises the governance of two successive female Prime Ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, and a brief period of the military-run government of General Moin Ahmed (2007–2008). Khaleda and Hasina came to power by default, as successors of two patriarchs, Ziaur Rahman and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They being far less educated and experienced by all the preceding prime ministers and presidents. This chapter elucidates how and why the two female leaders suffer from intense mutual disliking and hatred. Their mutual bickering has also influenced their followers, and this has immensely vitiated the political environment. This chapter highlight the quasi-democratic governance under Khaleda, and the quasi-fascist one under Hasina.

Chapter 7, “Problematic Integration of Minorities: A Case Study of *Bihari* Muslims,” is about a community, which has been around in what is Bangladesh today since the Mughal period. However, the overwhelming majority of this motley group of people (although perceived as a homogeneous linguistic community by outsiders) are known as *Biharis* in popular parlance. Most of the so-called *Biharis* in Bangladesh today, who speak several dialects of Urdu (and variants of Gujarati, Marathi, and some other north and northwestern Indian languages) are descendants of people who came to what is Bangladesh today, before and after the Partition of 1947, from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra,

West Bengal, Punjab, Sindh and other parts of India. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, most of them sided with Pakistan, and some actively collaborated with the Pakistani armed forces. However, Bengalis physically attacked them during the war and took away their jobs and properties after the Liberation. They till 2008 were collectively known as “stranded Pakistanis,” but the Pakistan government did not accept most of them as Pakistanis. This is an attempt to study the plight of the unassimilated *Bihari* Muslims (who are still not considered as true-blue Bangladeshis), who were also victims of a massive massacre, rape, loot and expropriation in 1971, and in early 1972 at the hands of Bengalis. In sum, *Biharis* not only lost their lives, honour and properties in their adopted homeland, but those alive, are also denied of dignity and even a true narrative of their sufferings.

Chapter 8, “The Crisis of Identity: Bengali, Islamic or Islamist Extremism?” elucidates the ambivalence of Bangladeshi Muslims—who roughly represent 90 per cent of the population—in regard to their national identity. Up to the Partition of 1947, they had been delusional about their ethnonational identity, believing themselves to be the offspring of Turco-Arab, Iranian-Afghan or Central Asian Muslim settlers in India. However, soon after the creation of Pakistan, they started their epical homecoming to Bengal, considering it as their ancestral home. This was so because of the discriminatory treatment of Bengalis by West Pakistan-based ruling elites. In less than twenty years after the movement for Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan in 1952, the rising tide of Bengali nationalism and the Pakistan military’s brutal retaliation against Bengalis in 1971 turned East Pakistan into Bangladesh. As elaborated in Chap. 3, the catastrophic experiments with state-capitalism sold as democratic socialism by Mujib turned the bulk of Bangladeshis—who had already been crestfallen—towards political and spiritual Islam. This chapter appraises the main factors behind the Islamization process in the country, and its short- and long-term effects on society, politics and the economy of the country. And, it also appraises the adverse effects of state-sponsored Islamization and false-flag operations against so-called Islamist terrorists under the Hasina government since 2009.

Chapter 9, “‘Culture Matters’: Towards Understanding the Crisis of Culture in Bangladesh,” argues that culture is the main determinant of development and underdevelopment everywhere. The discourse on Oscar

Lewis’s “culture of poverty” and a slight digression from it towards David Landes’s emphatic argument that “[c]ulture makes almost all the differences” help us reconstruct some substantial argument that culture is the sole determinant of development or underdevelopment—and Bangladesh is no exception in this regard. It also elucidates why the same Bengalis whose ancestors in the precolonial period had been one of the most industrious, skilled and prosperous people on earth are poor and backward, and live in a dysfunctional country today!

Footnotes

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2. Why Bangladesh? A Prehistory up to the Rise of Mujib, 1757–1963

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Pakistan has been achieved by the Muslim League. As long as I am alive, no other political party will be allowed to work here.

—Liaquat Ali Khan (First Prime Minister of Pakistan), Speech at Mymensingh, December 1950 (M. Rashiduzzaman, “The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10. No. 7, July 1970)

If we think Bangladesh and Bengalis were not independent in Pakistan, then it implies that in 1947 Bengali Muslims willingly embraced slavery of an alien nation! ... So, the war of 1971 was for separation or secession, not for independence but liberation It's also true, had there been no Pakistan on the basis of the Two-Nation theory, no Bangladesh would have ever been possible.

—Ahmed Sharif, *Kaler Darpane Swadesh, Muktodhara, Dhaka* 1985, p. 23

Keywords Battle of Plassey – Jinnah – Fazlul Huq – Suhrawardy – Pakistan – Language Movement – Ayub Khan – Yahya Khan – Bhutto – Agartala Conspiracy Case – Six Points – Mujib – Bangladesh

East Bengal Under the Raj, 1757–1900

In Mughal India, Bengal was the richest province of the richest country in the world. So much so that Bengal's economy in the pre-British period had shown signs of industrial revolution long before the process began in

Britain.¹ No wonder, pre-British Bengal was known as *Jannat al-Bilad* or “Paradise of Nations.”² While Mughal Bengal generated around 12 per cent of the world’s GDP, for over 200 years, it also accounted for the bulk of West European nation’s imports outside Europe.³ The most prominent in textile manufacturing and shipbuilding in the world, East Bengal was a major exporter of rice, opium, silk, cotton textile, steel, saltpetre (an important constituent of gunpowder), and very efficient and sought-after ocean-going ships.⁴ British shipbuilders duplicated the deck and hull designs of ships built in East Bengal.⁵ According to a renowned economic historian: “Bengal alone accounted for more than 50 per cent of the total of textiles and around 80 per cent of the total of raw silk imported from Asia.”⁶ Jahangir Nagar (Dhaka), the Mughal Bengal’s capital (1576–1704), had a population of more than a million, and was an important hub of textile industries. Thanks to the mighty Brahmaputra, Ganges and their hundreds of tributaries and canals, eastern Bengal was connected with the remotest village in the province, and with Orissa, Bihar, the entire Gangetic valley and the Indian Ocean.⁷ Possibly, it had the best navigable systems in the world. However, despite the overall prosperity of the people of Bengal under the Mughals and the independent nawabs, lower food prices also suggest the exploitation of the cultivators. Traders extracted the surplus from Bengali cultivators, weavers and craftsmen, which led to a huge flight of capital from Bengal to North India, and frequent famines in the richest province of the Mughals. Consequently, “the more efficient revenue collection implied larger transfer of resources from Bengal.”⁸ The aristocratic social and political structures kept the ordinary people of Bengal in a perennial “state of stability” and stagnation, which “did not lead to any agrarian or commercial revolution as it happened in Europe. All the gold and silver that flowed into Bengal quickly disappeared in the basin of the military and social aristocracies, and the society at large remained unchanged and unchanging.”⁹

The “Golden Bengal” came to an end in 1757 with Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah’s defeat at the hands of the British at Plassey. Bengal under the nawabs went through decades of devastating Maratha invasions from 1741 onwards, in which close to 400,000 civilians are estimated to have been killed.¹⁰ Marathas resorted to gang rapes of tens of thousands of Bengali women and children, and mutilated bodies of victims.¹¹ This is the first

known genocide of Bengalis in history, the toll was much higher than that of 1971. However, the process of peripheralization and immiseration of East Bengal, had begun long before the Maratha incursions and British annexation of the sub-region. The first step in this regard was taken by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. In 1704 he shifted the capital of the *Subah-e-Bangala* or the Province of Bengal from Dhaka to Murshidabad in northwestern Bengal, which substantially depopulated the Dhaka city. Mother nature also contributed to further marginalization of Dhaka and East Bengal. The Great Arakan Earthquake of 2 April 1762—having extreme intensity (XI) at 8.8 magnitude—shifted the bed of the Brahmaputra (aka Jamuna) around 150 kilometres to the west of Sonargaon to its present position near Aricha, and literally cut off the great Grand Trunk Road. Greater Dhaka, Mymensingh, Comilla, Noakhali, Barisal, Chittagong and Sylhet districts—more than half of eastern Bengal—were isolated from the rest of India in the west, and thus, from West and Central Asia.

Before Bengal managed to contain the Maratha marauders, another menace was lurking in the horizon. It was the well-entrenched East India Company, which in 1717 had acquired a generous *Farman* (royal grant) from Emperor Farrukhsiyar which gave the Company the right to reside and trade in the Mughal Empire, virtually freely except for a payment of 3000 rupees, annually. The *Farman* also allowed the Company the right to issue *dastak* (passes) for the movement of goods, which Company employees later misused for personal gain. The Company's duty-free trading rights turned it into the most attractive trading partner for local traders and bankers. The Company also built forts in Bengal, Madras and Bombay; brought British soldiers in India; and recruited, armed and trained Indians as soldiers. This prepared the ground for the Battle of Plassey, which the Nawab lost and Mir Jafar Ali Khan, his unfaithful general, in collusion with the Company became the new nawab in 1757.

Thanks to the collective ignorance of history among the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis, they are only familiar with the myths about the Battle of Plassey. Still today, even the bulk of the highly educated Bangladeshis believe the Nawab's Commander-in-Chief Mir Jafar's treachery was the decisive factor at Plassey. They do not know despite being literally out-manned and out-gunned, Clive won the battle decisively and the Nawab lost the battle, his life and kingdom. Clive had around 3000 troops and ten small cannons against the Nawab's 62,000 troops and fifty

large cannons. Mir Jafar and two other generals, Rai Durlabh and Yar Lutuf Khan, with 30,000 infantry and 20,000 cavalry troops, abstained from fighting after a few hours when Clive's victory was imminent and inevitable. With 62,000 troops the Nawab should have won the battle before Mir Jafar and two other generals decided to remain inactive. The Nawab also had the support of a small French infantry and artillery. At the end of the day, Clive's and his officer's military genius, and his troops' advanced training, discipline and valour, along with the Company's military organization, not Mir Jafar's (and Rai Durlabh's and Yar Lutuf Khan's) treachery sealed the fate of the Nawab. However, the debacle came soon after the Nawab's troops and artillery had managed to push Clive and his men to a defensive position in the mango grove of Plassey. By noon, suddenly a heavy rainstorm engulfed Plassey and surrounding areas, turning the Nawab's artillery totally ineffective. While Clive's troops covered their guns and gunpowder with tarpaulins to protect them from the rainstorm—which lasted for a couple of hours—the Nawab's army had no such contingencies. Their guns being totally useless with rain-soaked gunpowder, the Nawab lost the battle.¹² The humiliating defeat of the combined and huge army of a former nawab (1760–1763) Mir Qasim, Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II and Nawab Shuja ud-Daulah at Buxur on 22 October 1764 at the hands of Clive testifies this. While Clive had less than 10,000 troops, the Coalition had more than 40,000. This may be cited as an example to shatter the myth of “Mir Jafar Factor.” The bulk of the Bengalis, especially, the not-so-prosperous but hardworking and productive Bengali peasants, weavers and working classes could not care less about the outcome of the Battle of Plassey, because as exploited underclasses, they had never been integrated into the system of governance under the Mughals and independent nawabs. So much so that after knowing about the outcome of the Battle between the last nawab and the East India Company, an elderly villager at Plassey thanked himself for being “fortunate enough” to have witnessed the reign of six nawabs. However, it was not Plassey but Buxur that led to the foundation of the British Raj in the Subcontinent.

Following Buxur, in 1765, Robert Clive arm-twisted the impotent Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II to concede the most lucrative *Diwani* or sole agency to collect revenue of Bengal, the richest province of the dying Mughal Empire (which included Bihar and Orissa) to the East India Company. This hammered the last nail into the coffin of the Mughal

Empire. Afterwards, the Emperor without having any empire virtually lived on the not-so-generous pension given by the Company, till the end of the Empire in 1858. As the *Diwan* (revenue collector), the East India Company emerged as the “Lion Rampant,” as British historian Anthony Low has used the expression to appraise the rabid and defiant British Empire in the Subcontinent.¹³ The Company started doing wild experiments with the land system, civil and military administration, education system, and created loyal classes of landlords, traders, bureaucrats and professionals throughout British India, including Bengal.

The deliberately divisive British policy sharply polarized Bengal into loyal, privileged and prosperous; disloyal, unprivileged, impoverished and wretched classes of people, in general, represented by Hindus and Muslims, respectively. The collective extortion by the Raj and its local agents (*zamindars*, traders-cum-moneylenders, professionals and police) led to the Bengal Famine of 1770, which killed millions of people. The Permanent Settlement of 1793—which according to Marx, was “a caricature of English landed property on a large scale,”¹⁴ led to the mass expropriation and impoverishment of the actual cultivators—was the mother of all problems in colonial and postcolonial Bengal, cultural, economic, political, social and psychological. In short, the Permanent Settlement introduced a land system in Bengal, which fixed the landlords’ revenue liability to the government on a permanent basis—no future legislation or executive action could undo the Settlement—while the *zamindars* were at liberty to raise their tenants’ rent, and could also demand illegal exactions or *abwab* from them, when they needed extra cash for religious festivals, weddings in the family, or for buying horses and elephants for *zamindars*’ personal use. In short, the Permanent Settlement in Bengal introduced quasi-feudal relationships between landlords and tenants. As investing money in buying *zamindari* estates was much more lucrative than running businesses, or textile factories—by late eighteenth century, Bengal’s famous muslin and textile industry as a whole suffered an irreparable loss due to uneven competition with British textile industry—by early nineteenth century, Bengal was de-industrialized, almost completely.

The Permanent Settlement-induced neo-feudal production relations in rural Bengal on the one hand, retarded the growth of capitalism, on the other, it nurtured feudal culture and values, which is still quite well-entrenched in Bengali culture. *Zamindars* and their employees treated their

tenants as servants and menials. *Zamindars* did not allow their tenants to wear shoes in their estates (wearing shoes was a prerogative of the elites and gentlemen), or ride horses or elephants, construct brick-built houses on their holdings. Hindu *zamindars* in general did not allow slaughtering of cows in their estates by Muslim villagers. The *zamindari* system in Bengal became the symbol of Hindu domination and humiliation of Muslims in general. Not only the *zamindars* but also the bulk of the trading and professional elites—almost exclusively high caste Hindu Bengalis and Marwari Jain moneylenders and traders—were the main beneficiaries of the land system. Up to the 1850s, *zamindars* were entitled to their private police and prisons to arrest and torture “recalcitrant” tenants at their will. As almost all the *zamindars* were Hindu, so were most traders, moneylenders and the *bhadralok* or professional classes, overwhelmingly. Moneylenders or *mahajans* charged exorbitantly high rates of compound interest from their borrowers. So much so that borrowers sometimes took more than one or two generations to repay their debts.

The system widened the class and communal cleavages between Bengali Hindus and Muslims to such an extent that by early twentieth century all the ingredients of the Great Divide had already been there, in rural and urban East Bengal. In the long-run, the class conflicts, which were communal by nature between Hindus and Muslims, led to the communal partition of 1947. As elaborated below, for the bulk of the Muslims in East Bengal—agrarian hinterland of the British Raj—Pakistan virtually emerged as their “peasant utopia”; and eventually, it was the first major step towards the nation-state of Bangladesh.¹⁵

Although the *zamindars* were not the only exploiting class in rural East Bengal, beneficiaries of the oppressive land-system were mostly Hindu moneylenders, academics, writers and professional classes, known as *babus* and *bhadralok* (gentlemen), who were rich, arrogant, exploitive, communal (anti-Muslim); hence prejudiced against Muslims in general, and Bengali Muslim peasants and ordinary people, in particular. By early nineteenth century, Hindu Bengali beneficiaries of the Raj staged the so-called Calcutta-centric Bengal Renaissance. The English-educated and avowedly anti-Muslim Hindu Bengali nouveau riche classes provided the bulk of professionals and bureaucrats who were too eager to serve the British up to the early twentieth century. Hindu Bengali writers, including novelist Bankim Chatterjee (1838–1894) and Nobel Laureate poet and writer

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)—who himself was a big *zamindar* in East Bengal—belonged to the beneficiary classes of people. They were, in general extremely prejudiced against Islam, Muslim rulers of India in the past, and Muslims in general. Their Islamophobia is well-reflected in their literary works, essays and speeches. As Bankim’s historical fiction *Anandamath* and the Sanskrit song sung by his characters in the fiction, *Band-e-Mataram* (Glory to the Mother or Motherland) reflected his Islamophobia, so did Tagore’s short story “*Ritimoto Novel*,” play “*Prayashchitta*,” several essays and the poem “*Shivaji Utshab*” (The Shivaji Festival), which virtually celebrates a Hindu Maratha king, whose people—also known as *Borgis* in popular parlance in Bengal—had been killing, raping, pillaging and plundering Bengalis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Tagore’s prejudice against Muslims are well-reflected in his choice of expressions to denote Muslims as “violent foreign invaders,” “anti-British trouble makers”; and like Bankim, he espoused what later emerged as Hindutva or Hindu nationalism. Interestingly, both Tagore and V.D. Savarkar, the proponent of Hindutva, admired Shivaji, the Maratha Hindu king. Famous Hindu Bengali novelist Sarat Chatterjee (1876–1938) also believed that Muslims in India were descendants of foreign invaders, and wanted them to be kicked out of India.¹⁶ Their Islamophobia was not that different from what V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966)—the dreamer of Hindu rule through his fascistic Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) philosophy—and his admirers wanted (and still want) in India.

The overwhelming majority of the beneficiaries of the British land system, administrative reforms and the systematic destruction of Muslim landed and professional elites, and nawabs’ employees, mostly in the military and judiciary, created a pool of tens of thousands of expropriated and unemployed Muslims across Bengal. The consequential urban-to-rural migration of thousands of Muslims in Bengal depopulated urban and industrial cities and towns, especially Murshidabad, Dhaka and Sonargaon. Not long after Plassey, Calcutta (Kolkata)—the capital of British India—emerged as the largest metropolis in British India, and after London, the second largest in the Empire. In 1837, the British further circumscribed Muslim influence by replacing Farsi with English as the state language. While Muslims in general refused to learn English, or were not in a position to afford modern education in English medium schools and colleges across Bengal (and north India as a whole), Hindus had no qualms with learning

English, which like Farsi was another alien language for them. The nineteenth century witnessed the climax of Hindu Bengalis' pinnacle of success and influence as hard-core collaborators of the Raj. Meanwhile, Calcutta had witnessed the heydays of the so-called Bengal Renaissance. Hindu Bengali elites and intellectuals started enriching Bengali language and literature with secular writings, and a "Hindu Reformation," albeit with limited success. On the one hand, they were loyal to the British, and on the other, scornful of Muslims. By the mid-nineteenth century, Hindu Bengali professionals had been practising law and medicine, and teaching at colleges across Bengal, Assam, north and northwest India. This is what Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) called the "Bengali invasion." By the late nineteenth century, a handful of Muslim Bengalis started learning English, which was again too little and too late to create a parallel Muslim Bengali middle class. It is noteworthy that what Sir Syed had been doing in northwest India, Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (1800–1873) and Nawab Abdul Latif (1828–1893) were doing in Bengal, advocating English education as prerequisite for progress (which was synonymous with employability) among Bengali Muslims, with very limited success.¹⁷

It is unbelievable but true, Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), a Hindu religious reformer and founder of the Brahmo Samaj (a monotheistic religious community to discard idol worshipping among the Hindus, which later evolved into a religion called the Brahmo Dharma), in 1804 wrote a book in Farsi, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin* (A Gift to Monotheists), with an introduction in Arabic as Bengali had not yet become the language of intellectual discourse, both among the Hindu and Muslim elites. Roy's book was exclusively meant for Bengali Hindus, who he wanted to convert into monotheistic followers of Brahmo Dharma. Until Oxford-educated British scholar Nathaniel Halhed wrote the first grammar of Bengali language in English, *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* in 1788, Bengali remained the language of the hoi polloi. Again, this grammar mainly followed the language used by Hindu Bengalis in and around Calcutta. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of high-caste/upper-class Hindu Bengalis not only embraced English, but also totally discarded Farsi, which their next generation was no longer familiar with. And, upper- and middle-class Muslim Bengalis continued using Farsi and Urdu, hardly any Bengali. Only a handful of them bothered to learn any English at all. Muslim aristocrats or *ashraf* in Bengal believed that they being "descendants" of Arab, Persian

and Central Asian conquerors, saints and learned people were not Bengalis. Hence, Urdu, not Bengali, was their mother tongue! They had this extra-territorial hangover till the emergence of Pakistan in 1947. One may mention the pro-British titled-aristocrat Nawab Abdul Latif's testimony to the Indian Education Commission (Hunter Commission) in 1882, in this regard:

My opinion as regards Bengali is that Primary Instruction for the lower classes of the [Muslim] people, who are for the most part ethnically allied to the Hindoos should be in the Bengali language For the middle and upper classes of Mohammedans Urdu should be recognized as the vernacular.¹⁸

However, to be fair to Bankim Chatterjee, we must acknowledge the fact that despite his depiction of Muslim rulers of India as illegitimate invaders in his novel *Anandamath*, he was in favour of Hindu-Muslim unity in Bengal. He opposed Nawab Abdul Latif's recommendation to the Hunter Commission that Urdu be introduced as the vernacular of upper- and middle-class Muslims in Bengal. He classified all classes of Bengali Muslims as Bengalis and wanted them to learn Bengali to create a united Bengali nation.¹⁹

Besides the Permanent Settlement, the Company also started legal proceedings (Resumption Proceedings, 1828–1851) against all revenue-free land holders or *la-kharajdars* holding *jagirs*, *al-tamgha*, *a'ima* and *madad-e-mash*, mostly attached to mosques, shrines and madrasas (Islamic schools), and who had been almost exclusively Muslims, to confiscate all such holdings unless the owners could produce valid documents. They had been enjoying these endowments from Mughal emperors and nawabs (provincial governors). The government notified such endowment holders through newspapers and government gazettes, which were mostly not accessible to the beneficiaries; and many among them who went to the courts did not have any documents in support of their revenue-free endowments. And, this led to their expropriation and impoverishment.²⁰

Some British writers have succinctly explained how the British rule was responsible for the plight of the Bengali Muslims, and their consequential transformation into destitute, and perpetually unruly, untrustworthy rebels. One may cite William Wilson Hunter in this regard. The famous nineteenth-

century British historian, statistician and civil servant, who served in Bengal and wrote several books on India, profoundly sympathized with the Bengali Muslims, who, he thinks due to the discriminatory policy of British rulers, became one of the most downtrodden people in British India: ignorant, poor, disillusioned, marginalized, angry and mostly only employable as servants and cleaners. He writes in 1871: “A hundred and seventy years ago it was almost impossible for a well-born Musalman in Bengal to become poor; at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich.”²¹ Praising Muslims of northern India and Bengal, he writes: “The truth is, when the country passed under our rule, the Musalmans were the superior race, and superior not only in stoutness of the heart and strength of the arms, but in the power of political organization and in the science of practical government.”²²

The beginning of the “pro-Muslim” British policy in North India, including Bengal coincided the “discovery” of Muslim majority in the province in 1872 in the first census in British India. The Census of 1891 revealed slightly less than half of the fifty million Muslims in British India were in Bengal (including Bihar and Orissa). It is, however, difficult to agree with Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee, who thought the bulk of Bengali Muslims had Middle Eastern and Central Asian ancestors.²³ And, it is equally difficult to agree with Richard Eaton that most Muslims in deltaic East Bengal were descendants of indigenous tribesmen converted by Sufis during the Mughal period.²⁴

Soon, the extortionist indigo plantation, which the British government had earlier imposed on peasants in the province, stirred up massive peasant uprisings against the Raj in the 1850s and 1860s.²⁵ Meanwhile, Bengali Muslims, mainly from deltaic eastern Bengal districts of Pabna, Faridpur, Barisal, Dhaka and Mymensingh, and the northwestern districts of Rajshahi, Rangpur, Murshidabad, Maldah and the 24 Parganas (Calcutta), had joined several Islamic puritan and jihadist movements, some primarily against local (Hindu) *zamindars*, moneylenders, traders and against British rule, and one was initially anti-Sikh in Punjab and northwestern India, which eventually became anti-British. The rural Muslim peasant and weavers of deltaic eastern Bengal swelled the ranks of the Faraezi Movement (1820s–1860s) under Shariatullah and his son Dudu Mia; its counterpart in and around 24-Parganas under Titu Meer was primarily against local Hindu zamindars; and the country-wide jihadist movement the

Tariqa-e-Muhammadiyah, aka the “Indian Wahhabi Movement,” was primarily based in Punjab and northwestern India, with branches across the Subcontinent, from Delhi to Bihar, and Bengal to the Deccan. Tens of thousands of Bengali Muslims took part in these jihadi-cum-reformist movements, which ultimately fizzled out and were crushed by the British in the 1860s. It is noteworthy that tens of thousands of East Bengali Muslims—mainly expropriated and marginalized classes—throughout the 1820s and 1850s—crossed the British Indian territories of western Bengal, Bihar and Northwestern Province (later called Uttar Pradesh) to enter Punjab and northwestern frontiers of India to fight the Sikh rulers of the sub-region. Later on, they declared jihad against the British and took a leading role in the so-called Mutiny or the First Indian War of Independence in 1857–1858.²⁶ These Islamist reformist and militant movements have had profound influence on the collective psyche of Bangladeshi Muslims, even today. Although the jihadi movements fizzled out by the 1860s, they still have their followers mobilized by the fourth/fifth generations of descendants/disciples of Sayyid Ahmad Brelvi (1786–1831) and his associates in modern Bangladesh. One of the Islamist terror outfits in Bangladesh still bears the original name of the nineteenth-century “Wahhabi” outfit *Jamaat-ul-Mujahedeen of Bangladesh* (JMB) or the Party of the Mujahedeen of Bangladesh. I have discussed this in Chap. 8.

East Bengal Under the Raj, 1901–1918

The twentieth century was the most eventful era in the history of Bangladesh. No particular century was so eventful and significant in moulding its political geography, national identity, transformation of the economy, politics and culture of Bengalis in what was once the poor, backward and famine-prone agrarian hinterland of Calcutta. Let us start with the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the anti-Partition Hindu Bengali agitation through the Swadeshi Movement (movement for one’s mother land) during 1905–1911, when East Bengal was a part of a new province of eastern Bengal and Assam, with Dacca as its capital, as a separate entity from West Bengal. The period witnessed the rising aspirations of the tiny Bengali Muslim middle class—mainly emerging out of middle and rich peasant-cum-petty landlord (*talukdar/jotedar*) classes—which thought collaboration with the colonial administration was its best bet for its

sustenance and protection from the rapacious Hindu Bengali elites, landed, business and professional. Pro-British Muslim elite, collectively known as the *ashraf* (non-Bengali Muslim aristocrats, business elites and professionals, mainly from the provinces of Punjab, Gujarat, Bombay, UP, Bihar and Bengal), who started toeing the “loyalist line” in the 1870s under Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Nawab Abdul Latif and other members of the Muslim elites (which Hindu Bengalis and non-Bengalis had successfully done during the first hundred years of the Raj) emerged as the new champions of Bengali and non-Bengali Muslim interests, together. And, there is nothing hackneyed, superficial or over-generalized about the assertion that, as the British government had successfully promoted Hindu elites in the eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth, now it thought it was time to nurture their Muslim counterpart, for the obvious reason, for the best interests of the Raj through the age-old maxim of divide-and-rule. One may assume, the Partition of Bengal was an important step in this regard! One may also explain why Hindu Bengali elites, middle and lower-middle classes retaliated so sharply against the Partition of Bengal, which the colonial administration had guaranteed to the Muslims as a “settled fact.” Hindu Bengalis started country-wide agitation against the Partition, through civil disobedience and boycott of British goods, schools and courts (which was not that successful) and later virtually unleashed a reign of terror against British administrators, police and their Muslim collaborators.

The collective Hindu agitation and protests against the Partition through the Swadeshi Movement, later joined by militant nationalist/terrorist outfits like the *Anushilan Samity* (est. 1902) and *Jugantar* (est. 1906), turned the agitation violent and terroristic. India witnessed the first use of firearms and home-made bombs against government employees and Muslims.²⁷ The following example helps us understand the situation to some extent:

Teen-aged Prafulla Chaki (1888–1908) and Khudi Ram Bose (1889–1908), recruited by the *Anushilan Samity*, which was exclusively led and manned by Hindu Bengalis, came to the limelight after throwing bombs on a horse-drawn carriage to kill a British judge in Muzaffarpur (Bihar) on 29th April 1908. By mistaken identity of the carriage, they killed two British ladies instead. The judge had previously sentenced some Bengali nationalists to long prison terms

in Calcutta. While Prafulla Chaki killed himself to evade arrest, and Khudiram was arrested and hanged to death on 11th August 1908.²⁸

The Swadeshi Movement of Hindu Bengalis was anti-British by design, but anti-Muslim by default, Muslims became the main victims of attacks by rowdy Hindus. Pro-Swadeshi Hindu terrorist bomb attacks against British and Muslims were not uncommon during the Movement. One such attack on Muslims in Mymensingh was made by the “Mother Kali’s Bomb.” Hindu deities, especially Kali, became the inspiration of Hindu Bengali terrorist attacks during the Movement. Now, the reasons why Hindu Bengali elites fought the Partition of Bengal tooth and nail are not far to seek. Firstly, many or most Hindu *zamindars* were absentee landlords, while their estates were in East Bengal, they mostly lived in the urban comfort in Calcutta. Thus, an administrative/political divide between East and West Bengal was not a palatable option for them, both psychologically and economically. Secondly, since the separate province of East Bengal and Assam also had a separate high court, the Partition virtually tolled the death knell for Hindu Bengali lawyers, clerks and their associates at the Calcutta High Court, who had been heavily dependent on East Bengali clients. Rabindranath Tagore, also being an absentee *zamindar* and having extended family members and close associates who had everything to lose by a separate high court and revenue department offices in Dacca, had possibly no alternative to opposing the Partition. He was not only sympathetic to the *Jugantar*, which was a Hindu Bengali terror outfit, but wholeheartedly supported the Swadeshi Movement. Two of his songs, one written against the Partition in 1905, and another as a eulogy to British King-Emperor George V, who declared the annulment of the Partition in Delhi in 1911, later became the national anthems of Bangladesh and India, respectively. Ironically, while “Amar Sonar Bangla”—the 1905 song—was in protest of the Partition is the national anthem of Bangladesh, which is a by-product of the second Partition of Bengal in 1947. And surprisingly, the second song, “Jana Gana Mana” eulogized George V as the beloved leader of the People and the “dispenser of India’s destiny” is the national anthem of decolonized India. “The Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore sang a song composed by him specially to welcome the Emperor,” report the *Statesman* and some other dailies day after he sang it on 27 December 1911.²⁹

What followed the Swadeshi Movement was the annulment of the Partition of Bengal. In December 1911, the British King-Emperor George V declared this at a special *darbar* in New Delhi, which was effective from 1912. The unsettling of the “settled fact” unnerved Indian Muslims, within and beyond East Bengal. Meanwhile, in December 1906, Indian Muslim leaders had established the All-India Muslim League at Shahbagh, Dhaka (the building where it was born, since 1965 is known as Madhu’s Canteen, adjacent to the Arts Building of Dhaka University). The Muslim League declared its mottoes as promoting Muslim interests, Hindu-Muslim understanding and Muslim-British understanding in India. Soon, in 1909, the government started separate electorates on communal lines, to safeguard the minority Muslim community’s proportionate representations in all elective bodies, including the provincial and central legislatures in India. While the government-backed Muslim League and the Separate Electorates, theoretically strengthened Muslim position in Bengal and beyond, the annulment of the Partition disillusioned the Muslim community a lot. It was followed by Muslim League’s taking the unexpected decision to demand home rule for India, through a formal resolution in 1913. And, this made Muslim League palatable/legitimate in the eyes of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. He joined the League in 1913.

Many contemporaneous accounts, such as Nirad Chaudhuri’s and Abul Mansur Ahmed’s autobiographies (both of whom were born in the 1890s and grew up in East Bengal), are very informative about Hindu Bengali’s hatred for everything Islamic or Muslim in early twentieth-century Bengal. Nirad Chaudhuri (1897–1999) tells us Hindu Bengalis in East Bengal in general treated Muslims as livestock, and Hindu and Muslim school students sat separately in the classroom.³⁰ Abul Mansur Ahmed (1898–1979) narrates as to how Hindu Bengalis used to look down upon Muslims in general, and treated them as untouchables, which eventually led to retaliatory acts by Muslims. Since Muslim and peasant were almost synonymous in rural East Bengal, the first *Proja Sammelan* or agrarian Tenant Conference in 1914, held at Kamarer Char, a village in Jamalpur (Mymensingh), was the first organized move against Hindu *zamindars* and moneylenders in East Bengal.³¹

East Bengal's March Towards Pakistan, 1919–1947

The following section on the prehistory of East Bengal during 1919–1947 is all about the metamorphosis of the peasant-cum-lower-class Muslim Bengalis' class war into communal conflict against the Hindu landed, professional and business elites. Religion and ethnicity, not secular identity of class played the decisive role in the second Partition of 1947—leading to Pakistan—which was virtually a “peasant utopia” for the bulk of Muslim Bengalis (mainly peasants) in East Bengal.³²

For its adherents, the concept of Pakistan—literally a “land of the pure”—like socialism, was a one-size-fits-all solution to all of their mundane problems. While some supporters of the Two-Nation Theory believed, Pakistan would restore their dignity, power and the lost glory of the Mughal Empire; some of them also believed that Pakistan would revive the Early Pious Caliphate of the seventh century, or even the State of Medina, established by Prophet Muhammad in 622.³³ However, the overwhelming majority of Bengali Muslims, who were among the most passionate supporters of Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory in the 1940s, Pakistan would end the tyranny of the overpowering Hindu triumvirate of *zamindar-bhadralok-mahajan* (landlords, middle classes and moneylenders). Since the bulk of Bengali Muslims were peasants and agricultural labourers, to them Pakistan would also ensure “land to the tiller” (a popular communist slogan in the 1940s). East Bengali Muslims believed, Pakistan would be “A Land of Eternal Eid” (celebration),³⁴ or a “peasant utopia,” in the sense Eric Wolf has used the expression.³⁵ However, peasant masses at the grassroots did not create the leadership to translate the Two-Nation Theory into reality. Contrary to the Subaltern historiography, the story of the metamorphosis of East Bengal into the eastern wing of Pakistan is almost all about the successful manipulation of peasant consciousness by non-peasant elite leaders from outside, who successfully hegemonized the so-called autonomous domain of mass consciousness with cultural hegemony, and “false consciousness” to support and work for the movement for Pakistan. The bulk of the beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement—high-caste Hindu Bengalis—not only emerged as the neo-feudal aristocrats, but also emerged as the English-educated professionals or *bhadralok*, swelling the

ranks of nouveau riche classes in urban and rural Bengal. They were too rich and advanced for the bulk of Bengali Muslims to compete with. In sum, the Muslim triumvirate of *ashraf-ulama-jotedar* (aristocrats, clerics and rich peasants-cum-petty-landlords) provided the leadership, and the Muslim subalterns followed them blindly to fight their common enemy, the Hindu Bengali triumvirate of *zamindar-bhadralok-mahajan*.³⁶ In this backdrop we may agree with Wilfred Smith that the Partition was not the by-product of communalism, as most people understand the phenomenon in South Asia, but the by-product of the religion-based conflicting nationalism of Indian Hindu and Muslim communities:

Communalism in India may be defined as that ideology which has emphasized as the social, political, and economic unit the group of adherents of each religion, and has emphasised the distinction, even the antagonism, between such groups; the words “adherent and “religion” being taken in the most nominal sense ... *the phenomenon called “communalism” has developed into something for which “nationalism” now seems a better name.* [Italics mine]³⁷

By the same token, one just cannot undermine Bengali Muslims’ quest for equal opportunities and dignity, which they thought attainable only through a separate Muslim Homeland in Bengal, as communalism. As nations are “imagined communities,” not something very natural,³⁸ communalism like nationalism is something, which “needs only to be well started, and then it thrives of itself.”³⁹ Then again, contrary to some popular myths, Hindu Bengalis played a decisive role in the second Partition of Bengal in 1947.⁴⁰ Nirad C. Chaudhuri and Abul Mansur Ahmed help us understand why the Partition of 1947 was inevitable. Both tell us Bengali Hindus—irrespective of their class and profession—treated their Muslim neighbours as livestock, and sometimes even as untouchables during the British rule.⁴¹ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s own account of Hindu hatred for Muslim—who literally treated the latter as untouchables during the British period—also confirms Chaudhuri and Ahmed in this regard. He narrates one incident to highlight this. A Hindu classmate once invited him to their house, and afterwards he told him not to visit their house again as elders in the family did not like it, and they thoroughly washed the room, believing it had been polluted because of a Muslim boy (Mujib) had stayed there for a

while.⁴² Mujib also justifies his wholehearted support for Pakistan, a separate Muslim homeland in India: “I used to believe there would be no existence of any Muslim in united India.”⁴³

Soon after the end of World War I, the British government introduced further administrative measures, which it had started in 1905 with the Partition of Bengal, apparently to uplift the socio-economic conditions of the backward Muslim community in East Bengal. In hindsight, one may appraise these measures as divisive colonial methods to drive a wedge between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The British introduced certain constitutional/reformist measures to India, apparently in the name of granting self-governing institutions to Indians. One believes the constitutional reforms were aimed at neutralizing the nationalist movement by widening the gulf between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The British wanted to convince Indian Muslims that not the agitating nationalist leaders but the colonial administration was their real well-wisher. The widening of the franchise and the introduction of self-governing Union Boards at the grassroots level were major steps in this direction. The widening of the franchise down to the well-to-do peasants in Bengal (overwhelmingly Muslim) in 1919⁴⁴ and the Khilafat Non-cooperation Movement in 1920–1922 were important milestones towards politicization of East Bengali Muslims. They also led to further communalization of the Hindu-Muslim class conflicts. While Muslims who organized the extra-territorial Khilafat Movement—in solidarity with the Ottoman Caliph against the Allies—believed in Pan-Islamism, Gandhi supported the Movement with a view to bringing Muslim masses into the main stream of the nationalist movement. India during 1918–1947 was witnessing the dynamics of the interplay between the conflicting Indian (mainly Hindu) and Indian Muslim nationalisms vis-à-vis the dynamics of the British divide-and-rule policy.

One British government report in 1918 reveals the long-term impact of the various legislative measures on the psyche of the Indian masses:

Our rule gave them security from the violence of robbers and the exactions of landlords, regulated by amounts of revenue of rent that they had to pay, and assured to both proprietor and cultivator—in the latter case by the device of the occupancy right—a safe title in their lands As for the idea of self-government, it is simply a

planet that has not yet risen above their horizon Hitherto, they have regarded the official as their representative in the councils of Government; and now we have to tear up that faith by the roots, to teach them that in future they must bring their trouble to the notice of an elected representative—further, that they have the power to compel his attention Eventually it will dawn upon him ... that because he has a vote he has the means of protecting himself It will occur to him eventually that if landlords are oppressive and usurers grasping and subordinate officials corrupt he has at his command better weapon than the lathi or the hatchet with which to redress his wrongs.⁴⁵

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms—which take their name from Edwin Montague, the Secretary of State for India, and Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India—were all about gradual introduction of self-governing institutions to India, as outlined in the report of 1918, which was the basis of the Government of India Act, 1919. The Act granted the maximum concessions the British were prepared to make at that time. The Reforms increased the number of voters in Bengal, from 9000 to 1.5 million, of whom there was a large number of well-to-do Muslim peasants. The number of rural seats—practically, Muslim—also went up in the Bengal Legislative Council to thirty-three, which alarmed Hindu *zamindars* and *bhadralok*.⁴⁶ These measures along with certain legislative and administrative reforms adversely hit the vested interests of Hindu elites and middle classes, who had been the main promoters of anti-British nationalist and extremist movements (which were often terroristic by nature) in Bengal. Although, at the end of the day, these measures failed to bring the nationalist movement to an end, the subtle pro-Muslim bias and divisive nature of the acts emboldened anti-Hindu communal forces in Bengal, which by 1947 made the communal partition of the province inevitable.

In other words, Hindu *zamindars*, *bhadralok* and *mahajan* classes being the common enemies of Bengali Muslim elite, middle and lower classes, they could all be united for attaining their cherished Pakistan. While *zamindars* were parasitical and rapacious—and some Hindu ones were communal to the extreme, would not allow cow-slaughtering by Muslims in their estates—*mahajans* were as ruthless and extortionist as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. *Mahajans*' rates of interest were extremely exorbitant.

Many borrowers lost their properties in servicing their debts, and many could not repay their debts in their lifetime. What an East Bengali peasant in 1929 told a government official in this regard partially reflects the state of indebtedness among Bengali peasants: “My father, Sir, was born in debt, grew in debt and died in debt. I have inherited my father’s debt and my son will inherit mine.”⁴⁷

Unlike the caste- and *varna*-ridden Bengali Hindus, Bengali Muslims—irrespective of their classes—were inter-related to each other through blood and matrimonial ties. Thanks to Muslim elite manipulation, lower-class Muslims in East Bengal were fast deluded into believing in the undifferentiated Muslim monolith, juxtaposed against its Hindu counterpart. Despite its ebbs and flows, the colonial administration’s divisive “pro-Muslim” measures played significant roles in the promotion of Muslim separatism in Bengal. The communal partition of Bengal in the name of administrative exigencies, which separated Muslim-majority East Bengal from Hindu-majority West Bengal in 1905; the establishment of the All-India Muslim League in 1906; the creation of separate electorates for Muslims and other minority communities in India in 1909; drastic pro-tenant legislative measures during 1928–1938, which ensured occupancy rights to the tenants and curtailed the power of *zamindars* from 1914 onwards; the enactment of the Bengal Rural Primary Education Act, 1930, which mostly benefitted poor Muslim families; and the introduction of the Debt Settlement Boards in 1935 for the benefit of debt-ridden peasants may be mentioned in this regard. Despite bitter Hindu Bengali opposition, in 1921, the colonial administration established a university at Dacca (Dhaka) in Muslim-majority East Bengal. The university was a landmark in the history of twentieth-century East Bengal. It created a Bengali Muslim middle class, which subsequently played a leading role in the Pakistan Movement. Afterwards, the Hindu and Muslim communities in Bengal emerged as two amorphous monoliths, as if they had no common homeland, language, heritage and culture to live as citizens of undivided India. Interestingly, Bengali Muslim peasants believed that Muslim *zamindars* were benign, not as rapacious as their Hindu counterparts. This denial of intra-Muslim class conflict by lower-class Bengali Muslims—albeit delusional—played the decisive role in the creation of Pakistan in East Bengal. Muslims believed Muslim elites were not only benign and less exploitative, but also their friends, guides and protectors. Due to the

constant harping of this theme, ordinary Muslims started believing in the brotherhood of the Muslim *ummah* or the mythical global Muslim community, irrespective of their class, ethnic and linguistic differences. And, in this backdrop, Hindus emerged as the common enemies of all sections of the Muslim community.⁴⁸

Conversely, one may also cite a British government report which first revealed that Muslim rich peasants'/petty landlords' aspirations to become *bhadralok* had been the dominant theme in the politics of small towns and rural areas in East Bengal.⁴⁹ And, during 1920–1947, due to several government measures there was noticeable rise in the level of political consciousness among well-to-do peasants. Thus, while the *zamindars'* power was waning, the hopes and aspirations of *jotedars* and upper-middle peasants were growing. Another government report reveals, the prosperity of the rich and upper-middle peasants “awakened them to a sense of their inferiority.”⁵⁰ So, it is not always Frantz Fanon’s “wretched of the earth” or hopeless people in absolute poverty who make history, but people well-above poverty with growing hope and expectations are instrumental in staging revolutions or bringing about changes in socio-economic and political systems. Although the twentieth century was the century of “peasant revolutions” in Latin America and Southeast Asia,⁵¹ conservative Muslim peasants in East Bengal were least interested in any “land-to-the-tiller”-type radical revolutions. They were not the “makers and breakers of revolutions,” as Eric Stokes has used the expression in elaborating some communist-led peasant uprisings elsewhere in the Subcontinent.⁵²

Chalmers Johnson has used “peasant nationalism” in elucidating the Chinese peasant uprising of 1937–1945,⁵³ and we may use it to explain East Bengali Muslim peasants’ role in the creation of Pakistan. Johnson pinpoints as to why the Chinese Communist Party succeeded in mobilizing peasant support against the Japanese invaders in China, “because ... the population became receptive to one particular type of political appeal ... [which] offered to meet the *needs of the people*” [italics mine]. We know, contextually, Chinese and East Bengali peasant uprisings were different. While the Chinese Communist Party created a “people’s army” of predominantly peasant soldiers to fight the Japanese invaders, the Muslim League in East Bengal mobilized Muslim peasant support to fight the Hindu landed, professional and business elites with constitutional methods and legislative measures. As cited above, a British parliamentary report in 1918

observed that because the Indian peasant had a vote, he knew he had the means of protecting himself from oppressive landlords and moneylenders, he had at his command “better weapon than the lathi or the hatchet with which to redress his wrongs.”⁵⁴

The British volte-face on the Permanent Settlement, most visible in their support for the various tenancy legislations in Bengal, adversely affected the *zamindars*’ interests. By 1938, the *zamindari* system lost its heydays and legitimacy among people. So much so that by the 1930s, even Muslim *zamindars* publicly went against their own class interests, and demanded the abolition of the *zamindari* system. They were more interested in protecting their long-term communal interests, rather than protecting their class interests inherent in the not-so-viable and unpopular *zamindari* system. Running a *zamindari* was no longer the most lucrative business in Bengal. By the 1930s, not only Muslim aristocrats, but members of the budding middle classes emerging out of *jotedar* (petty landlords and rich peasants) families also championed the cause of *zamindari*-abolition across Bengal. Top leaders of the “aristocratic” Muslim League and the main political platform of Muslim peasants and tenants in Bengal, the Krishak Proja Party (KPP) under Fazlul Huq (1873–1962) (Chief Minister of Bengal, 1937–1943), were in the forefront of the anti-*zamindar* campaign. Soon after the Provincial Legislature Elections in 1937, Fazlul Huq and his followers formally joined the Muslim League. Interestingly, the Communist Party of India (CPI), mostly led by high-caste/upper-class Hindu Bengalis—some came from *zamindar* families, and/or were beneficiaries of the system—hardly ever demanded the abolition of the *zamindari* system. The CPI championed the cause of either factory and railway workers or landless agricultural workers and sharecroppers in Bengal, from the inception of the party in the 1920s till the Partition in 1947.⁵⁵

Unlike northwestern India, the Pakistan movement in East Bengal was more socio-economic than ideological by nature. The *zamindars* were not predominant in every East Bengal district. While petty landlords or *jotedars* were dominant in Rangpur and Dinajpur districts, Muslim middle peasants were dominant in Noakhali and Tippera (Comilla) districts. We need to understand these variations and differentiations to understand the background of the Partition at the macro and micro levels across East Bengal. We know the demands for the abolition of the *zamindari* and *mahajani* (usurious moneylending) systems and the introduction of free

primary schools in the rural areas, mainly for the benefit of Muslim masses, paved the way for the Partition due to the bitter opposition of these demands by Bengali Hindu elites and middle classes. We also need to know that a) while in Muslim *jotedar*-dominated northern districts, sections of the peasantry (landless sharecroppers)—which was overwhelmingly non-Muslim Santal and Garo tribesmen—supported the communist-inspired *Te-Bhaga* Movement on class line, which was about demanding two-thirds of the harvest (instead of the traditional one-half) for the sharecroppers from the *jotedars*; and that b) in Comilla and Noakhali districts, where self-sufficient and independent Muslim middle peasants—not *zamindars* and *jotedars*—had been the most dominant classes of people, the Congress Party-led nationalist movement had a substantial support among sections of the Muslim community. The Muslim League, which championed the cause of Pakistan, made a breakthrough in these districts only after most of the “secular nationalist” Muslim leaders shifted allegiance to the Muslim League after KPP’s Fazlul Huq and his associates had joined the Muslim League. It is noteworthy that the Muslim League and KPP were more radical than the Congress and CPI vis-à-vis the abolition of the *zamindari* system.⁵⁶

Not only Muslim elites and the budding professional classes wanted the communal partition, but Bengali Muslim masses also wanted the same, partially due to the influence of their Muslim patrons, and partially due to their economic exploitation and social marginalization by Hindu *zamindars*, *mahajans* and *bhadralok* classes. Contrary to popular belief, millions of Muslim sharecroppers/landless peasants did not join the CPI-led class-based *Te-Bhaga* movement (1947–1947). The non-peasant, high-caste and middle-class Hindu communist leaders—who also had the stigma of promoting a “godless” ideology—were not Muslim masses’ ideal leaders.⁵⁷ While strong patronage of Muslim *jotedars* and the sanctity of private ownership of land among these peasants dissuaded them from supporting the radical communist ideology, non-Muslim tribesmen, mainly Garos, Hajongs and Santals, who were the mainstay of the *Te-Bhaga* movement accepted communist leadership. Firstly, the tribal support for communal ownership of land resonated well with the communist programme of expropriation of the landlord classes. Secondly, thanks to the non-existent factionalism among the tribes, which made vertical mobilization of tribesmen through their chiefs easier, millions of Garos, Hajongs and

Santals swelled the ranks of the communists who wanted “*Te-Bhaga* today, Land tomorrow.” As Moni Singh (1901–1990), one of the most prominent communist peasant leaders in Bengal shared his views with this writer about the failure of the class-based *Te-Bhaga* and *Tanka* movements by sharecroppers in Bengal. He himself led the famous *Tanka* movement of Hajong (tribesmen) sharecroppers in the 1930s and 1940s in northern Mymensingh district at Haluaghat, Susang Durgapur and adjoining villages at the foot of the Garo Hills. He attributed the main cause of the failure of the *Tebhaga* movement among Muslim sharecroppers to the vitriolic communal propaganda by local Muslim League leaders. Ghiyasuddin Pathan, a prominent Muslim League leader of Mymensingh, is said to have successfully dissuaded Muslim sharecroppers from the *Te-Bhaga* (literally for two-thirds of the crop for sharecroppers) Movement, by promising them *Chou-Bhaga* (all the four quarters of the crop), as he assured them that Pakistan would ensure land to the tiller by kicking out all Hindu landlords out of Pakistan.⁵⁸

Appraising the dynamics of the “politics of partition” in Bengal makes us understand the multiple streams of movements on class and communal lines at the grassroots were actually microcosmic by nature, reflecting the broad stream of Muslim separatism in the Subcontinent. In a way, for Bengali Muslim peasants, Pakistan was a utopia, the culmination of their aspirations for freedom, not only political, but economic freedom too. As in China, non-peasant outsiders led Bengali Muslim peasants in their freedom struggle. However, unlike China, Bengali Muslim peasant leaders belonging to the Muslim *ashraf-ulama-jotedar* triumvirate had certain hidden agenda too. They wanted to replace the Hindu *zamindar-bhadralok-mahajan* triumvirate by installing themselves to dominant position in “Muslim Pakistan,” with Muslim grassroots support. Thanks to the rise of a Bengali Muslim middle class, emerging mainly out of upper peasantry in East Bengal (“East Pakistan” from 1956 to 1971) during 1947–1971—which would not have been possible without the Partition. In sum, the convergence of *East Bengali Muslim* and *Peasant* identities played the decisive role in the Partition.

Post-Partition East Bengal, 1947–1969

As we know, East Bengal lost its glorious past soon after the British ascendancy in 1757, and it never became a self-sufficient and viable entity, even in 2021, after fifty years of independence in 1971. In the 1940s, the Pakistan fever was at its peak among Bengali Muslims, and Jinnah, not Fazlul Huq or Suhrawardy, was their *Qaid-e-Azam* or the Great Leader, messiah and liberator. So much so that the bulk of Muslim Bengali leaders of the Muslim League had no qualms with the modification of the Lahore Resolution (as desired by Jinnah) by Muslim League lawmakers, from the central and provincial legislatures in British India, at Delhi's Muslim Convention on 7 April 1946. According to H.S. Suhrawardy:

General Secretary Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, at Jinnah's instance, corrected the word "states" for "state" in the Lahore Resolution as a typographical error, ignoring loud protestations from Bengali councillors, the most vocal of whom were Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, and Abul Hashim, General Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League.⁵⁹

Without engaging ourselves in a debate if Pakistan was inevitable or not so, we may all agree on the premise that what Poet Talim Hossain (1918–1999) thought of Pakistan as the "Land of Eternal Eid," not long after its emergence in 1947, it turned out to be a dystopia for many East Bengali Muslims who had once considered it their cherished utopia. There is no simple answer to the question why the people who had been instrumental to the creation of Pakistan later fought against the country and carved out independent Bangladesh out of the entity. It is unbelievable but true that only five and a half years prior to their declaration of independence in March 1971, the bulk of East Pakistanis had been avowedly pro-Pakistan. Thousands of Bengali soldiers gallantly defended (and many sacrificed their lives) Pakistan against India during the 1965 war. As the push factors from the western wing of the country were strong, so were the pull factors from the eastern wing. The former discriminated against the latter, denigrated Bengalis as inferior, exploited them, deprived them from their due share of export earnings and foreign aid. And, we know the "Indian design"—which was all about India's not-so-hidden desire to dismember Pakistan—also worked behind the emergence of Bangladesh with India's direct military intervention.

However, there were other important factors why the two wings of Pakistan could not stay together, so much so that the majority of the population (around 56 per cent), Bengalis seceded from West Pakistan. The western wing's relative prosperity—due to natural, historical and manmade factors—played the most important role in this regard. To begin with, West Pakistan had a favourable land-man ratio in comparison with East Pakistan, which had only 55,000 square miles of territory against West Pakistan's 310,000 square miles. More than 50 per cent of the population of the country lived in the eastern wing, on around fifteen per cent of the total territory of Pakistan. The western wing was also rich in mineral resources. It also had multiple irrigation canals built by the British, including the Sukkur Barrage across the Indus, which is the largest single irrigation project of its kind in the world, which irrigated approximately 25 per cent of total canal irrigated area in West Pakistan. Not only the western wing of the country was self-sufficient in food, but it was also relatively more developed, urbanized and industrialized than the eastern wing. And, it also had a large number of big traders, bankers, industrialists, landlords, prosperous farmers and well-trained civil and military officers and soldiers. Lahore had a university in 1880, and dozens of good colleges established in mid-nineteenth century. It had a much larger pool of well-trained and experienced civil servants (more than 100 ICS officers against none from East Bengal), more teachers, doctors, engineers, almost all the officers and soldiers of the armed forces, several garrison towns, much better roads and railway network than what existed in the eastern wing.

Days after the Partition, East Bengal started facing tremendous shortage of food and efficient administrators, teachers, professionals, traders and Bengali Muslim entrepreneur. By the early 1950s, almost all Hindu professionals, teachers, and landed and business elites had emigrated to India. The consequential vacuum was filled in by less qualified Muslim administrators, teachers and professionals. Many Muslim college teachers joined the one and only Dhaka University in East Bengal. The financial crisis was so acute that, according to a report of the Government of East Bengal, by 15 August 1948, the provincial treasury literally ran out of cash.⁶⁰ While the treasury was empty, government offices at Dhaka, the capital of the province, had inadequate supply of stationaries, the civil administration, police and military establishment were in shockingly bad conditions. On 14 August 1947 (the day Pakistan came into being), one

single Dakota plane-load of Muslim government officials (who opted for Pakistan on the eve of the Partition) came to Dhaka from Calcutta, and only around two dozens of them laid the foundation of the civil administration in East Bengal.⁶¹ One cannot agree more with Ahmed Kamal that while sections of the Muslim League leadership before independence had been apprehensive of Hindu domination in united independent India (hence the Partition!), others had illusions about the restoration of the lost Muslim glory in Pakistan, but none had any clear-cut idea about how to run a country like Pakistan.⁶²

While there was a tremendous flight of capital and massive exodus of Hindu teachers, doctors, engineers, professionals and traders from East Bengal to India following the Partition, hundreds of Muslim landlords, industrialists, professionals and thousands of traders, craftsmen, technicians and intellectuals crossed the border into the western wing of Pakistan. As Badruddin Umar observes: “(T)he large influx of refugees and flight of Muslim capital in West Pakistan created better investment opportunities there than in East Pakistan Almost the entire Muslim capital flowed into West Pakistan The fact that the capital of Pakistan was situated in the West also accounted for larger investment in that part of the country.”⁶³ While Karachi had an international airport and a seaport, eastern Bengal had none of those. Although prior to the Partition, East Bengal produced around 80 per cent of jute grown worldwide, all the jute mills were in and around Calcutta. While East Bengal was an underdeveloped agrarian and rural hinterland of Calcutta, the western wing of the country had a much better urban and industrial infrastructure, and a much larger pool of educated people during the British period, even before thousands of rich and educated Indian Muslims migrated there following the Partition. Following the Partition, scores of non-Bengali big business and industrialist families, Adamjee, Bawani and others from the western wing of Pakistan established scores of industries in the province. The Adamjee Jute Mills, established in 1950 at Narayanganj, became the largest of its kind in the world (closed down in 2002). The Calcutta-based Ispahani family, which flourished during the Bengal Famine of 1943, was among some other non-Bengali tycoons from Calcutta to invest in East Bengal.

Meanwhile, Khawaja Nazimuddin of the Dhaka Nawab family and Maulana Akram Khan had been well-entrenched, respectively, as the Chief Minister of East Bengal and the President of the Muslim League in the

province. Fazlul Huq and H.S Suhrawardy—not being in the good books of authoritarian and popular Jinnah—stayed back in Calcutta, and Abul Hashem (all of them had tried in vain to keep Bengal united in 1947) went to his ancestral home in Burdwan, West Bengal.⁶⁴ Although Nazimuddin was the Chief Minister, it was Aziz Ahmad—the Cambridge-educated, Punjabi ICS (later CSP) officer—the Chief Secretary of East Bengal during 1947–1952, who virtually ran the province as a colonial administrator. He represented the anti-Bengali lobby of the central government.⁶⁵ He frequently overruled Chief Minister Nazimuddin's and his successor Nurul Amin's decision, and once testifying in the dock of the Dhaka High Court said he used to maintain confidential files against the Chief Minister and his cabinet members for the central government. "He was virtually the Chief Minister of East Pakistan," informs Abul Mansur Ahmed.⁶⁶ He is said to have been the mastermind behind drastic actions, including police firing on unarmed students protesting Urdu to be the only state language of Pakistan, on 21 February 1952.

The above backdrop, provides various dimensions to the problem why the two wings of Pakistan—which also had mutual linguistic, cultural and even ethnic differences, besides the inherent and state-sponsored economic, social and infrastructural inequalities—could not stay together for more than twenty-four years. Let us look at the "why" and "how" factors leading to the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, which like that of Pakistan in 1947, was both "inevitable" and "avoidable." Since there are so many excellent studies on the problem of economic and infrastructural disparity between the two wings of Pakistan, this chapter highlights important historical, cultural (including political) and psychological factors that led to the separation of East Pakistan from the state of Pakistan, which as mentioned above, mainly had agrarian roots and the marginalized Muslim Bengalis' quest for upward mobility without having to compete with more advanced Hindus for jobs, business and professional opportunities. And, Muslim Bengalis had reasons to believe Hindu Bengalis hated and discriminated against them during the British period also because of their religious differences. Interestingly, soon after the Partition, the bulk of East Bengali Muslims started playing the "Bengali" card, by shelving the "Muslim" one. Badruddin Umar has aptly attributed this change of heart of Muslim Bengalis in post-Partition East Bengal as their "homecoming"—which led to their transformation of "Muslim Bengalis" to "Bengali

Muslims”—by shunning their mythical roots in the Middle East and Central Asia. The Language Movement of 1952 played the most important role in this regard. East Bengali Muslims started realizing that not Urdu, but Bengali was their mother tongue.⁶⁷ In short, during 1947–1971, East Bengali Muslims first metamorphosed into “Bengali Muslims” from “Muslim Bengalis” without discarding their Pakistani identity. Afterwards, in the 1960s, young and educated “Bengali Muslims” gradually discarded “Muslim,” and during and after the Mass Movement of 1969 (which led to the resignation of Ayub Khan as the President of Pakistan) many of them also discarded “Pakistani” from what had been the quintessential identity of “Bengali Muslim Pakistanis” up to 1968. The marginalized Hindu, Buddhist and Christian minorities in East Pakistan (Hindus being the most discriminated against and untrustworthy Pakistanis) remained politically invisible until the Liberation War in 1971. As briefly summarized in this section of the chapter, people and their leaders, their actions, reactions and ideologies they espoused in both wings of Pakistan during 1966–1971 made Bangladesh inevitable. Last but not least, had India been not directly involved in the Liberation War of 1971, including its sheltering around ten million East Bengali refugees during the war, and arming and training tens of thousands of freedom fighters—there would have possibly no Bangladesh, ever.

However, as events transpired, within a year of the Partition, Bengali Muslims were no longer under the illusion about Pakistan as the promised “land of eternal Eid,” or the reincarnation of the Early Caliphate of Islam. Although there was no reason to expect the grossly underdeveloped, densely populated, agrarian East Bengal with a handful of experienced administrators and educated people would become prosperous overnight, but this is what leaders of the Pakistan movement had promised the people. On top of that, the arrogance and prejudice against Bengalis inherent in non-Bengali Muslims—mainly among Urdu-, Punjabi-, Gujarati- and Sindhi-speaking—struck the last nails into the coffin of Pakistan, not long after its emergence. In hindsight, as it seems the two wings of the country stayed together almost for a quarter century, was itself a historical accident, so was its creation! No wonder, East Bengali Muslims started their “homebound” journey in less than year of its creation. The first Governor-General Jinnah’s public assertions in Dhaka in March 1948 in favour of *only* Urdu as the state language of Pakistan by ignoring Bengali, spoken by

the majority of Pakistanis was a rude shock for East Bengali intellectuals and students. However, Bengali opposition to Urdu as the only state language also reflected their constant identity crisis. Once Bengali Muslims dreamt of a united (Muslim) Bengal. Once that became unattainable, they somehow agreed to live in united Pakistan in its eastern wing, separated by more than 1000 miles of Indian territory. Interestingly, what Sukarno (one of the founding fathers of the nation) made it possible by adopting Malay, a minority language spoken mainly in Sumatra, the state language of Indonesia at the cost of Javanese (the majority language of the country) became a nightmare for Jinnah and eventually for what was united Pakistan up to 1971. East Bengalis' demand for Bengali as the second state language of Pakistan, virtually signalled the disintegration of the country.

Meanwhile, food shortage, unemployment and rude behaviour of non-Bengali ruling, professional and business elites added insult to their injuries. A retired non-Bengali senior bureaucrat and diplomat, Qudratullah Shahab, has beautifully summed up what had been going wrong with the state of Pakistan because of the rude and discriminatory policies of West Pakistani leaders, policymakers and bureaucrats towards East Bengal. He writes:

One day, I attended a meeting at the Finance Minister Ghulam Muhammad's office room in Karachi. The meeting was about purchasing sanitaryware for government offices and residential apartments in Karachi. Education Minister Fazlur Rahman [Bengali] asked for an allocation of sanitaryware for Dhaka as well. This request raised a loud roar of laughter in the room One gentleman said jokingly: "Since Bengalis relieve themselves behind banana plants, what would they do with commodes and washbasins?"⁶⁸

This happened when Liaquat Ali Khan was the Prime Minister (1947–1951). Shahab believes that in their subconscious, West Pakistanis had already started "laying the foundation stone of Bangladesh," not long after the creation of Pakistan.⁶⁹ Liaquat Ali Khan's government left no stone unturned to keep Fazlul Huq, H.S. Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhashani and Abul Hashim away from any politically important office in Pakistan politics. He was dead against having any opposition party in Pakistan. So much so that he publicly asserted during his visit to East Bengal at

Mymensingh in December 1950: “Pakistan has been achieved by the Muslim League. As long as I am alive, no other political party will be allowed to work here.”⁷⁰

Meanwhile, why East Bengalis at the grassroots were fast getting disenchanted by their newly achieved Sonar (golden/cherished/treasured) Pakistan—which is a popular epithet of Bengal or Bangladesh too, in common parlance—was not Jinnah’s insistence that Urdu alone would be the state language of the country, let alone the subtle or not-so-subtle discriminatory policies and prejudice against Bengalis by the bulk of non-Bengali ruling elites. It was the “near famine situation,” as Badruddin Umar and Ahmed Kamal have put it, when with the independence in 1947, East Bengal became the eastern wing of Pakistan. By 1949, there was almost a five-fold increase in the price of rice, the staple food, across East Bengal, and there were no signs of any reduction in food prices.⁷¹ The first seven years of post-independence East Bengal (1947–1954) were very eventful. And, some of the events eventually profoundly influenced the overall politics of Pakistan, eventually leading to the disintegration of the country in 1971. They were: (a) The hitherto influential Communist Party lost ground to the Muslim League; (b) not long after this, the grand old Muslim League was bifurcated into two entities, when in 1949, the East Pakistan Awami (or people’s) Muslim League emerged as its rival from within under the leadership of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, H.S. Suhrawardy, Abul Mansur Ahmed, Aatur Rahman Khan, Kamruddin Ahmed, Oli Ahad, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others; (c) in March 1948, Jinnah’s “Only Urdu” policy led to strong resentment among Bengali politicians, intellectuals and students; (d) the Hunger March in August 1948; (e) on 21 February 1952, the police opened fire and killed three students, one rickshaw-puller and a petty government servant in Dhaka, who were demanding Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan; and (f) the combined opposition parties defeated the ruling Muslim League in the provincial Legislative Assembly elections in March 1954.⁷²

One may briefly highlight some important events—without much elaboration—in the political arena of East Pakistan during March 1948–March 1954, from Jinnah’s controversial “Only Urdu” policy to the massive electoral defeat of the ruling Muslim League Party in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly Elections. While Bengali intellectuals, politicians and students were in a state of shock and disbelief at what appeared to be

Jinnah's blatant disrespect for the sentiment of the majority of Pakistanis (East Bengalis), the food crisis in East Bengal and the government's utter mishandling of the problem in less than one year after independence triggered the first organized protest against the government. The Communist Party (of Pakistan)—which had earlier agreed on principle Indian Muslims' demand for Pakistan—decided to organize a province-wide Hunger March on 14 August 1948, exactly one year after the Partition. Their main slogan (surprisingly in Urdu) being, "*Lakhon Insaan Bhuka Hai, Yeh Azadi Jhuta Hai*" (While millions are starving, this independence does not mean anything) was not well-taken by the vast majority of people in East Bengal.⁷³ As Badruddin Umar elucidates, it was young communist activists who spearheaded the Language Movement, a brainchild of the Communist Party of India or CPI (which virtually controlled the communist movement in East Bengal), which sought to divide Pakistan by separating its eastern wing. Bengali as a state language of Pakistan amounted to nothing more than a flimsy excuse here. So much so that, the CPI not only infiltrated East Bengal's student body and youth movement to promote the interests of East Bengal against the Central Government of Pakistan but also founded a cultural organization, the Tamaddun Majlis, with a Perso-Arabic or "Islamic" name, a fortnight after the Partition. Abul Kasem, a young lecturer from the Physics Department at Dhaka University was the President of the Tamaddun Majlis.⁷⁴ Umar further elaborates: "In the manner of an astrologer, Abul Kasem predicted within fifteen days of Pakistan's birth that the Muslim League would break its promises, and its leaders were totally ignorant of Islam. Interestingly, renowned Islamic scholars like Maulana Akram Khan was the President, and Maulana Abdullahil Kafi was a vice-president of the party." He further demonstrates that many cultural outfits, such as the Gano Azadi League [People's Liberation League], the Purbo Pakistan Sahitya Sangsad [East Pakistan Literary Council], and the Tamaddun Majlis were communist pockets in East Bengal. Even though the Tamaddun Majlis did not openly advocate communism, it was heavily influenced by it. The CPI virtually ran the Communist Party in East Bengal from India even after the Partition up to the early 1950s.⁷⁵ However, the Communist Party in East Bengal, having overwhelming majority of Hindu leaders, virtually failed to gain any support among Bengali Muslims, excepting a handful of sharecroppers, landless cultivators and factory workers. By 1952, the East Bengal

government simply crushed the communists, hundreds of leaders and activists were arrested, several gunned down at the Rajshahi jail, and the bulk of their leaders either went underground or fled to India. Despite Maulana Bhashani's lukewarm support for the communists ("he rather used them for his own politics," observes Deben Shikdar, a communist leader who spent twenty-two years—1948–1969—underground).⁷⁶ Meanwhile, a section of the East Bengali Muslim League leaders and activists, including Ataur Rahman Khan, Abdus Sabur Khan, Kamruddin Ahmed, Shamsul Haque, Fazlul Kader Chowdhury, Khondokar Mushtaq Ahmed and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had started losing faith and confidence in the party leadership under Maulana Akram Khan, who served the interests of the non-Bengali Dhaka Nawab family and the Ispahanis.⁷⁷ Soon after the Partition, the provincial government introduced the Compulsory Levy Order to force rice-growers to sell their produce to the government at a price, lower than the prevailing market rate. However, pro-government well-to-do peasants somehow managed to evade the Levy Order.⁷⁸

West Pakistanis often derided Bengali Muslims as "circumcised Hindus" as well. As early as 1948, the Pakistan government deprived East Bengal from its only source of revenue, the sales-tax, which it transferred from the jurisdiction of the provincial to the central government. By 1958, the central government had spent more than 50 per cent of the total allocation of the National Budget in the improvement of Karachi, the national capital. West Pakistan also imported more than East Bengal although the latter generated the bulk of the export earning for Pakistan. Long before Sheikh Mujib demanded greater autonomy for East Pakistan through his Six-Point Programme in 1966, Awami Muslim League Leader Ataur Rahman Khan had demanded the same at the Grand National Convention for drafting the Constitution of Pakistan at Dhaka in 1949. In his speech at the Convention, he reminded the audience as to how the Netherlands' denial of self-rule to Belgium in the early nineteenth century led to the independence of the latter. In his retort to Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's assumption that Bengali represented Hindu culture, and that East Bengalis wanted to secede from West Pakistan, Ataur Rahman Khan told him: You don't know Bengalis. They don't like any browbeating by anybody. Bengal never ever fully accepted the hegemony of Pataliputra or Delhi, it retained its independence or quasi-independence for centuries. If

you force us to separate, we would do that. Bengal never likes to be anyone's slave!"⁷⁹

In January 1948, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed—two young Bengali Muslim League leaders—published a booklet in Bengali “The Unfortunate Ordinary People of East Pakistan,” which reflected their suffering under the Muslim League government.⁸⁰ Mujib later took part in the “Hunger March” and was arrested in late 1949 and remained in prison up to March 1952. Not long after, the least expected thing happened! After Jinnah had left Dhaka for Karachi in the wake of his imprudent assertion about making Urdu the “only” state language of Pakistan in March 1948, Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin repeated the same thing in early 1952. He was no Jinnah! His advocacy of “only Urdu” further stirred up the agitated Bengali youths, intellectuals and politicians. Meanwhile, instead of addressing the hunger issue and the overall misery of the people in East Bengal, the government resorted to mass arrests and intimidation of “anti-Pakistan,” “pro-Indian” and “communist conspirators” in the province. Police firing on communist prisoners at Rajshahi jail on 15 April 1950, which led to several deaths, was a major step in this regard. The ruling Muslim League party did not learn any lesson from the first electoral defeat of its candidate, Khurram Khan Panni to Shamsul Huq of the Awami Muslim League, at a bye-election of the provincial legislature at Tangail in 1949, following the massive hunger marches in East Bengal from August 1948 onwards. Instead of conceding, the government took legal action against Shamsul Huq, and the compliant court declared his election void, after almost a year, in 1950. On the fateful 21 February 1952, the unprovoked, least expected, and indiscriminate police firing on Bengalis demanding Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan, on the street in front of Dhaka University’s Arts Building led to five deaths of Bengali youths, including three students. It is noteworthy, although the Awami (people’s) Muslim League—which later dropped “Muslim” and became the vanguard of the Liberation War in 1971—emerged as the main opposition to the ruling Muslim League in 1949, the communist-dominated Youth League played the most effective role in the Language Movement in 1952.⁸¹ The Language Movement, as it transformed itself from a not-so-loud protest against Jinnah’s 1948 speech at Dhaka University into a nationwide mass movement in 1952 was actually the most important, bold and first step of the East Bengali “Nation” against the state of Pakistan, towards

complete freedom, which it achieved in 1971. Until 1952, despite police and government atrocities on Bengalis during the first four years of Pakistan, “the ground was not yet prepared for the revolt.”⁸² However, it was different in 1952. Badruddin Umar, has aptly observed:

The police firing on 21 February transformed, almost overnight, the Language Movement into a movement of the broad masses of the people for the overthrow of the existing government. The people realized much more clearly the regional character of the Pakistan Government and the need to struggle for establishing not only certain basic regional rights but for consolidating themselves as a linguistic nation.⁸³

And the rest is history! From the 1950s onwards, 21 February became the symbol of courage, sacrifice and victory for the bulk of educated East Bengalis after Bengali had officially become one of the state languages of Pakistan, along with Urdu. With the passing of each year since the 1950s, the ritualistic celebration of the *Shaheed Dibash* (Martyrs’ Day) on 21 February became more widespread and intensified across East Pakistan. For educated Bengalis, it became something more than a day of commemoration of the martyrs of 1952. By late 1960s, it not only turned into an emotionally and politically charged day to take a vow to promote not only Bengali language in every sphere of life, including the medium of instruction, but, with a twist of history, Bengali nationalist politicians, intellectuals and their followers convinced many that the Language Movement signalled the beginning of the independence of East Bengal. While the Language Movement was primarily a political movement against West Pakistani hegemony over East Bengal, it was never primarily against Urdu, let alone English, as widely believed in Bangladesh. However, East Bengali Muslim intellectuals and politicians nurtured diverse identities as Pakistanis or Bengalis. To some, the primacy of Islam and Pakistan was more important than Bengali with regard to their national identity, and to some, their Bengali identity was more important than the Islamic or Pakistani one. While Fazlur Rahman (1905–1966), a Central Minister from East Bengal, proposed that Bengali be written in Arabic script for the sake of Islamization of the language, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah (1884–1969), renowned Bengali scholar and a linguist, believed that Bengalis could learn

Urdu as they learnt English, but he also believed that: “The day Arabic becomes the state language of Pakistan, the creation of the state of Pakistan becomes justified.”⁸⁴ Secondly, contrary to what Sheikh Mujib claimed on 21 February 1972 in an interview with Bangladesh Television that on 21 February 1952, he had given instructions to the Language Movement activists on a piece of paper through a window of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (adjacent to Dhaka University’s old Arts Building, the focal point of the Movement), where he purportedly had been undergoing treatment, it was nothing but an absurd claim as on 21 February 1952, Mujib was not in Dhaka but Faridpur Jail until his release on 27 February. Badruddin Umar in his article in *Desh* (a Bengali weekly from Kolkata) on 21 February 1998 demolished this claim by Mujib, which the Hasina government of Bangladesh proscribed.⁸⁵ Last but not least, as frequently pointed out by Muslim League leaders, from Jinnah to Nazimuddin, and Nurul Amin to Fazlur Rahman, Hindu Bengalis and communists—many operating from Kolkata—took a leading role in the Language Movement.⁸⁶ As Badruddin Umar elucidates:

The Language Movement was a great landmark in the history of East Bengal not only for its political significance, but more importantly because it helped, in a big way, to clear the fog surrounding the identity of the Bengali Muslims It turned the Muslim Bengalis into Bengali Muslims. Since then ... the vast majority of the Muslim middle class in Bengal never really looked back.⁸⁷

There are, however, several pertinent questions regarding the ritualistic observance of 21 February as Martyrs’ Day in Bangladesh since 1953, including Bengali policemen’s firing at a mob which violated Section 144 of the Pakistani Penal Code (which prohibits “unlawful assembly” in public spaces) to attack the East Bengal Legislative Assembly building in Dhaka on 21 February 1952 (which resulted in several deaths), be observed as the National Martyrs’ Day year after year? (b) Who introduced the ritualistic ceremonies to commemorate the tragic deaths of five Bengali youths, such as wearing black badges, marching barefooted to the Shaheed Minar (there are thousands across the country) in the early hours of 21 February, and placing flowers to honour the victims of police firing (in Dhaka, the victims

are buried at Azimpur Graveyard, mourners visit their graves and lay flowers)? The Communist Party of Bengal and others who wanted to separate East Bengal from Pakistan seem to have been behind all these rituals and commemorations of “Martyrs’ Day” since 1953. Exaggerated accounts of what happened on 21 February 1952—to demonize Jinnah, non-Bengalis and Pakistan—have been integral to observing the day in Bangladesh, and among Bangladeshi diasporas abroad.

In March 1954, the ruling Muslim League party virtually lost its hold over East Bengal after its disastrous electoral defeat in the provincial legislative elections at the hand so the newly formed coalition of the East Bengal Awami (People’s) Muslim League, Krishak Sramik Party and two other parties, led by Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani and H.S. Suhrawardy. The United Front with its Twenty-One-Point programme, which included the state language and provincial autonomy issues, captured 223 out of the 237 seats, leaving only nine for the Muslim League.⁸⁸ This electoral defeat virtually liquidated the Muslim League in East Pakistan. On 3 April 1954, the *Jukta Front* (Joint-Front) formed government in East Bengal, with Fazlul Huq as the Chief Minister.⁸⁹ However, the central government in Karachi did not take this defeat gracefully. And, soon it got a pretext to dissolve the Fazlul Huq Ministry after the Chief Minister had given a “seditious” speech in Calcutta on 30 April. He said:

Bengalis are an invisible nation. They speak in the same language Their ideology and way of life are also identical Today I will have to participate in the construction of future history. By India, I understand both Pakistan and India, because I consider that division as artificial.⁹⁰

While Huq’s Calcutta speech questioned the legitimacy of Pakistan, his interview with the *New York Times*, published on 23 May 1954, rocked the boat and Huq lost his job as the Chief Minister. He is said to have told his interviewer John D. Callahan that East Bengal “wished to become an independent state.” And, was alleged to have told Callahan: “Independence will be one of the first things to be taken up by my ministry.” On 30 May 1954, despite Huq’s vehement denial of what the American daily had published on the previous day, Pakistan’s Governor General Ghulam Mohammad terminated the Huq Ministry and brought East Bengal under

Governor's Rule.⁹¹ Interestingly, Fazlul Huq had been a staunch supporter of the communal partition of India in the late 1930s through 1947. In 1937, after getting the majority of seats in the undivided Bengal Legislature in 1937, he dissolved his "secular" Krishak Proja Party (KPP), and he himself and all the KPP members of the Legislative Assembly formally joined the Muslim League. In 1953, he tried in vain to become the President of the Muslim League in East Bengal.⁹² Meanwhile, hours after ten more new ministers of the Fazlul Huq cabinet had taken oath on 15 May, severe communal rioting took place between Bengali and non-Bengali workers at the Adamjee Jute Mills at Narayanganj. Abul Mansur Ahmed, who was among the new ministers, gives an eyewitness account of the aftermath of the rioting. He witnessed hundreds of dead bodies, killed in the most gruesome manner.⁹³ There is every reason to believe that Muslim League leaders orchestrated the Adamjee carnage to destabilize the Huq government in East Bengal. The end of Huq government also signalled the beginning of the end of West Pakistani hegemony in East Bengal (East Pakistan, during 1956–1971).

While the Muslim League was fast losing ground in East Pakistan, the opposition parties, especially the Awami Muslim League, which after the 1954 Elections dropped "Muslim" from its name, became the most dominant among the opposition parties. In 1956 the Awami League formed government in East Pakistan and ran the show for two years until the imposition of martial law in 1958. Chief Minister Aftab Rahman Khan has given a good account of the problem his government faced from the ruling elites in West Pakistan, and West Pakistani leaders' arrogance and unwillingness to develop East Pakistan. Some of them publicly told him: "East Pakistanis should be always thankful to West Pakistan." Some of them even told him that East Pakistan had never been integral to the concept of Pakistan. One West Pakistani who served as governor of East Pakistan, once publicly said that Bengali Muslims were uncircumcised, and quasi-Hindu.⁹⁴ After 1954, another important milestone on the road towards Bangladesh was the famous All-Pakistan Cultural Conference at Kagmari in Tangail in 1957, convened by Awami League President Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Maulana Bhashani was the first East Bengali to have demanded the separation of East Pakistan from its western wing. He formally bade goodbye to West Pakistan by uttering "Assalamu Alaikum West Pakistan," which is the Muslim way of bidding goodbye.⁹⁵ Bhashani's

biding goodbye to Pakistan was not the solitary example of Bengalis' growing disenchantment with Pakistan. As narrated by Manoj Basu (1901–1987), a Bengali writer from India, Sheikh Mujib told him in Beijing in 1956 that would eventually liberate East Pakistan.⁹⁶ Mujib reminded Basu what he had told him in Beijing in 1956, when they met again in Kolkata in 1972.⁹⁷

In the above backdrop, the imposition of martial law across Pakistan by President Iskandar Mirza the following year, on 7 October 1958, was nothing but a desperate attempt by West Pakistan to assert its eroding hegemony in East Pakistan. And, later it proved to be yet another step towards the separation of East Pakistan. President Mirza, however, needed an alibi to justify the dismissal of the civilian governments (central and provincial) and suspending the Constitution. The Army Chief General Ayub Khan has justified the imposition of martial law:

In East Pakistan a serious crisis occurred on 31 March 1958, when Fazlul Huq, the Governor, dismissed Aatur Rahman Khan's cabinet. Later that night Fazlul Huq was himself dismissed by Iskandar Mirza. Aatur Rahman was succeeded by Abu Hossain Sarkar who was in turn dismissed within twelve hours of assuming office and the Aatur Rahman Cabinet was back again in power. As in West Pakistan, the NAP [National Awami Party under Maulana Bhashani] played its disruptive role of supporting and then opposing one ministry after another in East Pakistan. Its withdrawal of support led to the fall of the Awami League ministry on 19 June and the United Front Ministry succeeded it. The same day the NAP switched support to the Awami League and brought down the United Front Ministry. The situation became so confused [sic] that the President declared Section 193 (President's Rule) in the province on 24 June 1958. After two months Aatur Rahman Khan was reinstated as Chief Minister. The Provincial Assembly declared the speaker of "unsound mind" and a brawl in the House on 21 September resulted in the death of its Deputy Speaker, Shahed Ali. By the middle of 1958 the whole country was in the grip of a serious economic crisis. Reckless spending seemed to be the order of the day.⁹⁸

Soon, the Army Chief General Ayub Khan removed Mirza, and became the Chief Martial Law Administrator, and then the President of Pakistan. Mirza imposed martial law to “de-politicize” Pakistan, asking the politicians to leave the country “while the going was good.” By 10 October, large-scale arrests of politicians took place, including Maulana Bhashani, Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, Abul Mansur Ahmed and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. One agrees that political chaos, corruption by politicians and America’s deep involvement led to the military takeover. And, initially it was very popular in both the wings of Pakistan.⁹⁹ He remained the President till his removal by another martial law on 25 March 1969 by General Yahya Khan. Despite phenomenal economic and social development in both the wings of the country—more so in West Pakistan in comparison to East Pakistan—Ayub Khan somehow paved the way for Bangladesh, as military rule and the so-called Basic Democracy of Ayub Khan were much more autocratic than what the country had experienced in the first eleven years of its existence.¹⁰⁰ On the one hand, the Ayub regime spelled out with no ambiguity that West Pakistanis were calling the shot in the country as the military was overwhelmingly manned by people from the western wing, and on the other, formal or informal military rule was devoid of even the elementary aspects of democracy. On both counts, being further marginalized, Bengalis in East Pakistan under Ayub Khan were further disillusioned about their fate in united Pakistan. Despite hundreds of development projects taken by the Ayub regime—too many to mention in one breath—and West Pakistani industrialists in East Pakistan, all of them were dwarfed in magnitude by the mega development projects, including the new capital Islamabad, that Ayub Khan built in the western wing. There are overwhelming number of writings in support of the abysmal disparity against East Pakistan that West Pakistani ruling elites created and nurtured during the twenty-four years of united Pakistan.¹⁰¹ However, contrary to what Bengali intellectuals and politicians argued in support of their clam about the disparity against East Pakistan by citing the abysmal representation of Bengalis in the armed forces and bureaucracy, one may argue that: firstly, at the time of the Partition in 1947, while West Pakistan had ninety-five ICS officers (including immigrants from India), East Pakistan had only one (“nominated” ICS) officer; and secondly, only around half a dozen Bengali Muslim military officers, opted for Pakistan. It is noteworthy that the first exclusively Bengali army unit (East Bengal

Regiment) was raised in 1948, at the initiative of M.A. Jinnah. To be fair to Ayub Khan, despite the teething problems in his Basic Democracy, he ushered in a period of visible and quantifiable development in both the wings of Pakistan. Thanks to the introduction of quota system in the central bureaucracy, especially for East Pakistan, the pre-existing gap between the Bengalis and West Pakistanis in terms of number was gradually becoming narrower during the Ayub and the successive Yahya administration.

One wonders how fair was the overblown thesis of inter-wing disparity against East Pakistan. Was the disparity a post-Partition phenomenon or was it inherent in the historical and economic factors? West Pakistan had a much better land-man ratio than that of East Pakistan; the latter having around 55 per cent of the total population of Pakistan, concentrated on fifteen per cent of the total area of the country; the former was self-sufficient in food, much more urban and industrialized than the latter; had mega irrigation projects undertaken by the British; West Pakistan had almost all the big industrialists and businessmen in the country, and almost all the ICS officers and military officers, trained during the British period. People in the western wing consistently had a higher per capita income than those of East Bengal. In 1949–1950, it was eight per cent more than that in East Bengal, and by 1954–1955 the gap increased further and became 19.46 per cent.¹⁰² And dearth of capital in East Pakistan was further aggravated by the massive flight of capital from East Bengal to India. Soon after the Partition, thousands of rich and well-to-do Hindus had emigrated to India with their wealth. Among Hindu emigrants from East Bengal, during 1947–1950, only around four per cent were peasants, 38 per cent traders and industrialists, 12 per cent doctors, teachers, pleaders and other educated professionals.¹⁰³ Interestingly, while East Bengal in 1949 had higher per capita income (\$46) than that of several Asian countries, including South Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia, it was slightly lower than West Pakistan's,¹⁰⁴ between 1960 and 1970 while Pakistan's GDP growth rate was 6.7 per cent, East Pakistan was growing at a staggering rate of 3.6 per cent only.¹⁰⁵ One may attribute this to the disparity against East Pakistan—manmade, natural and historical—by West Pakistan.

Thus, blaming West Pakistanis alone for whatever exploitation and deprivation of East Pakistan took place during the twenty-four years of the Pakistani period is anything but fair. And, nothing could be farther from the truth than singling out the Ayub regime as the main culprit in this

regard! In sum, as the proponents of the “Two Economies” theory questioned as why West Pakistan imported more than East Pakistan, why West Pakistanis got more bank loans than East Pakistanis, and why the western wing got more investments than the eastern wing, we need to understand capital begets capital. And, those who passionately argued and convinced Bengali students, intellectuals, politicians and their supporters that East Pakistan was merely a colony of the western wing as the former had almost all the top civil bureaucrats and military generals forgot to mention one thing: while East Pakistan almost started from the scratch in 1947 the late comers (East Bengalis) in the civil service and military, who started entering the lucrative civil and military services of Pakistan only in the late 1940s and early 1950s, would not become full secretaries and generals in less than twenty years of service. But this is what the proponents of the “Two Economies” were highlighting in favour of their not-so-convincing theory. Ralph Braibanti, an authority on the bureaucracy in Pakistan, attributes the poor representation of Bengalis in the central elite services of Pakistan more to historical forces than to the machinations of West Pakistanis.¹⁰⁶ One may cite the following figures to rebut Rounaq Jahan and other proponents of the “disparity theory,” especially in regard to the central superior civil service: In 1948, East Pakistan had 11.1 per cent representation in the service, in 1949 it rose to 45 per cent, and in 1965 the two wings of the country were on par in this regard. Interestingly, the corresponding figures for 1967 and 1968 were 65 per cent and 55 per cent for East Pakistan.¹⁰⁷ However, despite these loopholes and over-generalizations in the “Two Economies” theory of Rehman Sobhan et al., the disparity between the two wings of Pakistan to the detriment of the eastern wing was both historical and manmade or deliberate and institutionalized. West Pakistanis and “non-Bengalis” in general were prejudiced against East Bengalis. Their collective, blatant, subtle and not-so-subtle contempt for everything Bengali, and their constant denigration of East Bengali Muslim culture—including their alleged “Hinduised mannerism, food habit, language” and so on—alienated millions of educated East Bengalis from West Pakistanis and “non-Bengalis.” West Pakistanis’ casting aspersions on East Bengalis’ loyalty to Pakistan, and insulting them as “circumcised Hindus” were the last straws.

Last but not least, Ayub Khan’s extremely prejudicial comments in his autobiography on Bengalis in general, and on H.S. Suhrawardy and Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman in particular, further weakened the fragile bond between the two wings of Pakistan. Ayub Khan not only pampered and politicized military officers and bureaucrats, but as discussed above, he also made village elders corrupt through generous funding of grassroots projects in rural areas through his Work Programme.¹⁰⁸ In hindsight, it appears that the elected local self-government introduced by the British in 1919—which the British believed would be beneficial, would empower people at the grassroots—thanks to Ayub Khan’s cynical abuse of the institution, backfired. However, to be fair to Ayub Khan, firstly, it was President Iskander Mirza of Pakistan, not Ayub the Army Commander-in-Chief, who introduced martial law on 8 October 1958; and secondly, martial law did not destroy democracy or democratic institutions in Pakistan, because they were simply non-existent at the federal level. All the cabinet members, including the successive Prime Ministers, from Liaquat Ali Khan to Feroz Khan Noon, and all the members of the Central Legislature had been unelected and nominated by the five provincial legislatures of Pakistan. One may even argue that even Ayub Khan’s Basic Democracy was far more democratic than what had prevailed up to October 1958. Basic Democracy was about forming an electoral college—whose members were directly elected by the people—in 80,000 constituencies across Pakistan, 40,000 in each wing of the country, who used to elect the President and the members of the national and provincial assemblies. They were also the local government representatives at the Union Council level. Union councils were conglomerates of villages and municipalities in urban areas. The main flaw in the whole arrangement was that the BD members and chairmen of the 80,000 union councils—who collectively worked as the electoral college—were also entrusted with various development projects at the grassroots, and were not accountable to anybody but the President of the country. And the President had neither the time nor the will to monitor their corruption at the grassroots. Many, if not most, BD officials resorted to corruption while implementing various “Work Programmes” or development projects at the grassroots. And, last but not least, they had reasons to be loyal to Ayub Khan who, unlike the main stream of the opposition parties, guaranteed the continuation of Basic Democracy.

Interestingly, Gunnar Myrdal unabashedly praises Ayub Khan’s style of governance, and his undertaking multiple development projects, and purging of corrupt elements in the administration. To Myrdal, the regime

was a “co-dictatorship of the higher army officers and civil servants,” which in the name of purging corrupt people only purged politicians in the opposition camp while “surprisingly few higher civil servants actually lost their jobs.” Surprisingly, a scholar of Myrdal’s stature fails to visualize the rot inherent in what he calls a “quasi-dictatorship” of Ayub Khan.¹⁰⁹

I elaborate further on how the Ayub administration was largely responsible for the rise of Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan and Mujib’s role as Bangladesh’s champion from 1963 to 1971 in the following chapter. He was not the first to envision an independent Bangladesh out of East Bengal. Maulana Bhashani, along with a number of leftist activists, played a pivotal role in separating East Pakistan from Pakistan. Some of them wished to merge the eastern wing of Pakistan with India, while others wished to have East Bengal become a sovereign nation, free of either India’s or Pakistan’s tutelage. Soon after Pakistan was founded, the pro-Urdu assertions of Jinnah, Nazimuddin and other Pakistani politicians led East Bengalis to realize that although they were the majority of Pakistan, they had little say in its running. Furthermore, they were marginalized not only politically and economically, but also culturally as lesser Pakistanis than non-Bengali minorities. Bengali was not used in Pakistan’s currency, stamps, or national emblems until the early 1960s. Separation of East Pakistan from the state of Pakistan was also inevitable because economically and professionally more advanced non-Bengali communities of the country provoked a deep sense of inferiority complex among marginalized East Bengalis. They knew their best prospects lay in an independent Bangladesh, a separate political entity of their own. Overall, backward and poorer Bengalis could not live in Pakistan as equal citizens. It was these discriminatory policies of the central government in Karachi, then in Islamabad, that hammered the final nail into the coffin of a united Pakistan. Essentially, the utopian expectations of East Bengali Muslims regarding Pakistan, the perceived and actual exploitation of East Pakistan by their western counterparts, the Indo-Soviet desire to dismember Pakistan (based on geopolitical reasons), and the hawkish Pakistani generals’ and politicians’ desire to let East Pakistan secede from Pakistan made Bangladesh inevitable.

Finally, the emergence of Bangladesh cannot be explained in terms of sheer economism, or actual or highly exaggerated accounts of economic disparity between the two wings of Pakistan to the detriment of East

Pakistan. The cleavage between the two wings was primarily political/cultural and psychological. Bangladesh grew out of East Bengalis' perpetual quest for recognition and respect, from the Language Movement in 1948 to the prorogation of the National Assembly of Pakistan by Yahya Khan on 1 March 1971, which agitated and enraged them most. According to some, "Humiliation is the strongest force that creates rifts and breaks down relationships between people."¹¹⁰ The Pakistani military crackdown on 25 March 1971 was just the last nail into the coffin of united Pakistan, not the main reason behind Bangladesh.

Footnotes

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3. The Rise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 1963–1971

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It is not Mujib's style to fully confide in anyone.... He manages to keep everyone happy by following a modus operandi whereby he looks at one person, talks to another, and pats a third on the back, with result that each feels he is receiving a share of the attention.

—Alamgir Rahman, Mujib's Adviser, ESSO General Manager, East Pakistan (The American Papers: Secret and Confidential, India-Pakistan-Bangladesh Documents 1965–1973, Compiled and Selected by Roedad Khan, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1999, p. 461)

“Ebarer sangram, amader muktir sangram! Ebarer sangram, amader swadhinatar sangram!” (“This time, it's a struggle for freedom! This time, it's a struggle for independence!”)

—Sheikh Mujib's famous speech on 7 March 1971

Keywords Suhrawardy – Bhashani – Ayub Khan – Yahya Khan – Indira Gandhi – Sheikh Mujib – Agartala – Six-Points – Serajul Alam Khan – Bhutto – Tikka Khan – Tajuddin – Abdur Razzaq – Tofael Ahmed – Alamgir Rahman – Ambassador Farland

Trial and Tribulations: 1963–1969

Mujib's patron-cum-mentor H.S. Suhrawardy's death in December 1963, in a way, precipitated the political secession process in East Pakistan. Not long after his death, in 1964 Mujib left the NDF (National Democratic Front), a

conglomerate of the main opposition parties, and revived the Awami League. Other NDF coalition members' vacillation or unwillingness to revive their respective parties catapulted Mujib very high, as the single and most viable opponent of Ayub Khan. Meanwhile, Maulana Bhashani deaccelerated his anti-Ayub movement after his long meeting with Ayub in Rawalpindi on 22 August 1963. In September, he went to China and met Chairman Mao Zedong. As advised by Mao, Bhashani decided to tone down his anti-Ayub rhetoric. And the rest is history! He lost credibility among opposition parties as a supporter of Ayub Khan.¹ While Bhashani's anti-Ayub movement lost momentum—regained only in late 1968—Mujib emerged as the sole spokesman of Bengalis in East Pakistan.

In 1963, Mujib romanticized the idea of separating East Pakistan from the western wing of Pakistan with Indian assistance. According to Mujib's nephew Sheikh Shahidul Islam, Mujib made a secret trip to Agartala (India) in 1963 with Ali Reza, a co-conspirator of the Agartala Conspiracy Case. However, Nehru's unwillingness to assist Mujib financially or militarily discouraged him. Mujib, however, kept in touch with local Hindu secessionists in East Pakistan, especially Chittaranjan Sutar, who sought to carve out four or five districts of East Pakistan as Swadhin Banga Bhumi or Independent Hindu Land. In addition, Mujib maintained contacts with Indian businessmen in Dhaka and the Indian consulate. Mujib's main liaison with the Indian government involved Bhupati Bhushan Chowdhury, aka Manik Chowdhury, and Bidhan Krishna Sen, who were both co-accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case. Tajuddin Ahmed and Barrister Amirul Islam knew of this arrangement.²

Interestingly, Badruddin Umar produces a very important document, a signed statement by Shachendralal Singha, a former Chief Minister of the Indian state of Tripura, who hosted Mujib at Agartala (capital of Tripura state) for fifteen days in 1963. Mr Singha handed over his statement to Faiz Ahmed, a renowned Bangladeshi journalist and writer in Delhi, in 1991, which goes like this:

In 1963 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with 10 persons, including my brother Sri Umeshlal Singha MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly of Tripura], came to my bungalow in Agartala According to the request of Mujib Bhai I saw our Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru He did not agree to allow Mujibur

Rahman to make any propaganda from Tripura. This was because after the war with China he [Nehru] was not prepared to take such a big risk. So, after staying for 15 days he [Mujib] left Tripura Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was promised every kind of help.³

It is noteworthy that the Pakistan government, which started the Agartala Conspiracy Case against Mujib and his co-conspirators in January 1968, did not make any reference to Mujib's clandestine 1963 visit to Agartala anywhere in the charge sheet. While the plaintiff had no information on this, Mujib denied all charges of his involvement in any conspiracy to disintegrate Pakistan. Interestingly, Ayub Khan thought Bengalis would rise against Mujib and his co-accused convicts for their involvement in the conspiracy against Pakistan, but that sort of thing did not happen at all.⁴ It may be mentioned here that the Agartala Conspiracy was a very small and insignificant move by a handful of junior Bengali military officers: one Army major, four captains, two lieutenants, and one lieutenant commander from the Navy, three CSP officers, and two ordinary civilians. Among the total 35 accused, the rest were non-commissioned officers, sergeants, and corporals. The Government could not prove Mujib's direct involvement in the conspiracy. Upon the withdrawal of the Case and Mujib's unconditional release from prison in February 1969, he emerged as the only leader in East Pakistan whom Islamabad feared most and considered worthy of consideration. Mujib and his party did not look back afterward.

Regardless of whether one agrees with Sheikh Shahidul Islam that Mujib's ultimate goal was to keep the Ayub administration under pressure to gain maximum autonomy for East Pakistan,⁵ there is another reason to consider. After winning the majority of seats in the 1970 election, Mujib was desperately trying to become the Prime Minister of a united Pakistan, even though he had actively participated in the secession of East Pakistan from the western wing of Pakistan in the early 1960s. The separation of East Pakistan from the state of Pakistan with the help of India seems to have changed Mujib's mind after Nehru's cold shoulder in 1963. Following the 1970 elections, which sort of secured Mujib's position as Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mujib was only interested in keeping the two wings of Pakistan together by keeping the pro-Bangladesh elements of his party at bay. A US State Department confidential document indicates Mujib had a

deal with Yahya Khan. As per this understanding, Yahya Khan would remain the President of united Pakistan, while Mujib would be its Prime Minister.⁶

Meanwhile, Ayub Khan lost his short-lived spell of glory and fame earned during and immediately after the India-Pakistan War of 1965. However, following the peace treaty between the belligerents, brokered by the Soviet Union at Tashkent in January 1966, the Awami League President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tabled his famous Six-Point Programme at a conference of leading opposition parties in Pakistan at Lahore in February. The charter of demands in the Six Points was for removing disparity between the two wings of Pakistan and to put an end to the internal colonial rule of West Pakistan in East Pakistan. It virtually demanded almost complete independence for East Pakistan, with separate currency, international trading rights on its own, no transfer of money from the eastern to the western wing of the country.⁷ In a way, the 1965 War precipitated the Six Points. Seemingly, Bengali soldiers' heroic performance in the War and almost the total neglect of East Pakistan's defence by Islamabad were contributory factors behind the Six-Point demands. Then again, irrespective of how the Six Points were framed, Mujib repeatedly argued that amendments could be made to the charter of demands. And, he persistently hammered this into his discussions with Ayub Khan in March 1969.⁸

The Six Points and demands for withdrawing the Agartala Conspiracy Case against Mujib and others led to the penultimate movement towards freedom through the mass movement of 1969. It witnessed the end of Ayub Khan's decade of "guided democracy," and the end of Pakistani hegemony in its eastern wing, eventually in 1971. Thanks to Ayub Khan's loud celebration of his ten-year-old dictatorship in 1968 as the Decade of Reforms and Development, Pakistanis in both the wings seemingly became conscious of and resolute about removing him from power for the sake of democracy and freedom. Ayub Khan's motto of "development before democracy" simply backfired. Meanwhile, his former Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—who had resigned within months after the signing of the Tashkent Declaration in January 1966, as he considered it a sell-off of national interests by Ayub Khan—started a vitriolic campaign against his former boss in the second half of the year.

Several academics expressed their feelings regarding East Pakistan's need for maximum autonomy in the Six-Point charter of demands, such as professors Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan and others. Specifically, it envisaged a federal Pakistan and complete autonomy for all provinces, especially East Pakistan. The main objective of the scheme was to stop the flight of capital from East to West Pakistan. To stop the flight of capital from East Pakistan to West Pakistan, it suggested either two separate but freely convertible currencies or one currency for the entire country provided separate banks reserves, separate fiscal and monetary policies were adopted for East Pakistan. The plan also included the creation of a special militia to defend East Pakistan. Mujib presented the charter of demands at an All-Party Conference in Lahore in February 1966. Mujib was not the author of the Six Points, but he always claimed to be. Late Khairul Kabir, a pro-Awami League journalist/banker, told this writer that he had handed in a copy of the Six-Point charter of demands to Mujib at the Dhaka Airport before he boarded his plane for West Pakistan to attend the All-Party Conference in Lahore.⁹ Although Kabir wasn't the main author of the Six Points, his office was where the draft was drafted. Abul Mansur Ahmad, a senior leader of the Awami League, is believed to have drafted the Six Points, a claim he denied but claimed ownership of the booklet published under Sheikh Mujib. The Six Points were co-authored by some Bengali bureaucrats, besides Awami League leaders Abul Mansur Ahmad and Kamruddin Ahmed. They include CSP officers Shamsur Rahman Khan, Fazlur Rahman, Ruhul Quddus, Sanaul Haq, A.K.M.Ahsan, A.K. Musa, journalist Abdul Ghaffar Chowdhury and journalist/banker Khairul Kabir.¹⁰ Even though the Six Points did not advocate the secession of East Pakistan from the federation of Pakistan, some of the framers of the document were implicated in the secessionist Agartala Conspiracy Case with Mujib. However, we know that Mujib's involvement in the plot was at best dubious.

The Six-Point demand was made in the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with an explanatory note with the sub-title "Our Right to Live."¹¹ The Pakistan government's harsh retaliatory action against the Six Points eventually backfired. Mujib became far more popular than ever before. However, Mujib's subsequent explanations and willingness to modify the charter of demands suggest it was anything but the blueprint of an independent East Pakistan. Ayub Khan and almost all politicians in West

Pakistan, including Bhutto, vehemently criticized the charter of demands as anti-national and secessionist. Soon, there were Province-wide violent protests in favour of the charter of demands. On 7 June 1966, Dhaka and some other cities in East Pakistan witnessed violent clashes between police and Awami League activists, leading to several deaths of protesters. In May 1966, the government arrested Mujib, mainly for placing his “secessionist” Six Points, and was soon implicated in the Agartala Conspiracy Case. Meanwhile, he spent several years in jail from 1958 to 1965, sometimes for days and sometimes for several years, at a time, up to 22 February 1969.

However, it is very significant that although apparently Mujib and Awami League leaders, in general, were very uncompromising about any modifications of the Six Points after the demands had been formally announced in February 1966, as Moudud Ahmed (Mujib’s aide and confidant at the Round-Table Conference (RTC) with Ayub Khan in March 1969) reveals, Mujib agreed to modify the Points “in the form of a Constitutional Amendment Bill under the 1962 Constitution” within the framework of united Pakistan “as a single sovereign state.” Mujib personally assured this to Ayub at a dinner on 13 March 1969, privately arranged in Islamabad, exclusively attended by Ayub, Mujib and the latter’s Pakistani patrons-cum-friends, Yusuf and Mahmood Haroon. Mujib categorically told Ayub that the Six Points would ensure the integration of Pakistan. As Mujib’s aide Moudud Ahmed reveals: “Mujib looked very happy after the dinner and thought that the Army perhaps had realized the gravity of the crisis and ... wanted to preserve Pakistan by consent and not by force.”¹² Soon after Mujib’s return from Islamabad to East Pakistan the Awami League prepared a draft of the 1962 Constitution Amendment Bill, which among other things, agreed on (a) retaining the name of the country as the “Islamic Republic of Pakistan”; (b) retaining the provision that the President of the Republic must be a Muslim, as specified in 1962 Constitution; (c) continuing with one currency—which would remain a federal subject—but East Pakistan would maintain the custody of the foreign exchange earnings and holdings through the proposed Regional Reserve Bank as a preempt any flight of capital from the eastern to the western wing; (d) transferring the federal capital from Islamabad to Dhaka, while the principal seat of the federal legislature would be in Islamabad. Mujib agreed to guarantee a certain percentage of the revenue earned in East Pakistan to be credited to the federal reserve bank, and also to allow a

federal government tax on certain specified heads as per the requirements of the federal government; (e) shifting the seat of the Supreme Court from Islamabad to Dhaka; and (f) making arrangements for the representation of all Pakistanis in the federal government jobs, including the armed forces, on the basis of population.¹³ Thus, nothing could be farthest from the truth that the Six Points meant the eventual disintegration of Pakistan, and Mujib wanted the dismemberment of Pakistan, especially after his party's landslide victory at the parliamentary elections of December 1970. which, sort of, ensured his prospects of becoming the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Interestingly, President Yahya Khan, during his first visit to East Pakistan after the Elections in early 1971, publicly mentioned Mujib as the "Future Prime Minister of Pakistan" in Dhaka.

By late 1968 in East Pakistan, Maulana Bhashani—who had virtually suspended his anti-Ayub movement for almost five years up to mid-1968—re-kindled the flame of dissension against the quasi-military dictatorship of Ayub Khan—after his release from prison in early December (he had been arrested on 12 October 1968). On 6 December he led a procession to the Governor's House in Dhaka and declared a gherao or encirclement of the palace for some time, where his followers had a fight with the police. He declared a *hartal* or general strike to be observed across East Pakistan on 7 December. The government imposed Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code and prohibited meetings and processions in Dhaka. Law enforcers resorted to firing, killing two people and injuring many in Dhaka. And, the police action intensified the opposition movement. So much so, that the *Time* magazine made a cover story on Bhashani's promotion of violence against the Ayub regime, especially in the countryside across East Pakistan, and portrayed him as "Prophet of Violence" and "The Fire-eating Maulana."¹⁴

On 4 January 1969, the Student League, Student Union (two groups) and National Student Federation or NSF (Dolon group) jointly formed the *Sharbadolio Chhatra Sangram Parishad* (All-Party Student Action Committee), and put forward the famous Eleven-Point charter of demands, which partially included the Six Points and numerous short- and long-term socio-economic and political programme for the state of Pakistan, including democracy, nationalization of industries, banks and big businesses. On 7 January the opposition parties except Bhutto's people's Party and Bhashani's NAP formed a united front called the Democratic Action

Committee (DAC). While Mujib had been facing a special tribunal as a co-accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case in Dhaka, the DAC without Bhashani did not take off in East Pakistan. In the backdrop of the collective failure of the DAC to organize a mass movement, the Student-Action Committee played the most important role in overthrowing the Ayub Regime. As an active participant in the movement as a student of Dhaka University, this author witnessed the leading role of student leaders belonging to the rebel faction of the pro-government National Students Federation (NSF), especially Mahbubul Haque Dolon and Nazim Kamran Chowdhury, who was the General Secretary of the Dhaka University Students Union (DUCSU) in 1969. While the pro-Awami League Student League leaders, including Tofael Ahmed, the DUCSU Vice-President, were dithering about initiating an all-out anti-government movement, Kamran Chowdhury took the leading role in initiating a programme demanding the withdrawal of the Agartala Conspiracy Case (which Tofael Ahmed, in the presence of this author, thought would be seditious/anti-state) on 17 January. The NSF and the pro-Chinese group of the East Pakistan Student Union took the leading role on the first three days of the Movement—16 January to 19 January—in and around the Arts Building of Dhaka University.¹⁵ On 20 January, the killing of Asad, a leftist student, by a police officer in point-blank range gave a turning point to the movement. On 24 January, tens of thousands of people came out on streets across East Pakistan. And it was the beginning of the end of the Ayub regime. On 22 February, due to the tremendous momentum in the movement, Ayub Khan decided to withdraw the Agartala Conspiracy Case and release all the accused, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.¹⁶

On 15 February 1969, Pakistan Air Force Sergeant Zahurul Haque, a co-accused in the Agartala Case, was killed in custody by a Pakistani soldier. His killing infuriated Bengalis to the extreme. They declared him as the “First Martyr of the Liberation War.” Following the killing of Zahurul Haque, for the first time, student demonstrators publicly raised the slogan in rallies: “*Bir Bangali Astro Dharo, Bangladesh Swadhin Koro*” (Brave Bengalis take up arms and liberate Bangladesh). Bhashani, on the same day, demanded the immediate release of Sheikh Mujib and threatened the Pakistani authorities that he would attack their garrison in Dhaka.¹⁷ After their release, Mujib and several co-accused straight came to the Dhaka University Arts Building to formally end the “fast unto death” of four

University students who for days had been on a “fast unto death”—including this writer—for the withdrawal of the Agartala Case. On the same day, Ayub Khan declared that the national elections would be held on the basis of adult franchise, and Pakistan would be a parliamentary democracy. He also asked national leaders to join a Round Table Conference with him. While Bhutto and Bhashani declined the offer, all prominent leaders attended the Conference, including Mujib. Afterwards, East Pakistan went through massive general strikes, gheraos and violent attacks on ruling-party activists and local government office bearers in small towns and the countryside. From 1 March to 25 March alone, around 200 Muslim League (ruling-party) supporters were killed and more than 2000 houses were burnt in the rural areas. Bhashani’s supporters continued lynching “people’s enemies.” This continued till the imposition of martial law on 25 March 1969, the second in the history of Pakistan.¹⁸

The Ayub administration came up with the famous Agartala Conspiracy Case, which implicated thirty-five Bengalis, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and several civilians, military officers and soldiers, in a conspiracy to liberate East Pakistan with Indian help. Some conspirators, including Sheikh Mujib, are alleged to have secretly gone to Agartala in India to seek Prime Minister Nehru’s support their secessionist movement. On Nehru’s refusal to help the East Bengali separatists, they are said to have changed their strategy. Finally, the Pakistani intelligence unearthed the conspiracy and brought multiple charges of sedition against the accused. Allegedly, Sheikh Mujib conceived the plot to ignite an armed revolution against West Pakistan to take East Pakistan out of Pakistan. In May 1966 the police arrested Mujib for stirring up East Pakistan wide agitations in favour of the Six-Point Programme. Around 1500 Bengalis were arrested in connection with the plot in 1967. The trial started in June 1968 under a special tribunal in Dhaka. However, the Tribunal failed to prove the existence of a conspiracy between Mujib and India for the secession of East Pakistan.¹⁹

One of the co-accused, Mahfuzul Bari, who told this author about his involvement in a conspiracy to kill President Ayub to accelerate the process of disintegration of Pakistan in the early 1960s, has not questioned the veracity of the Pakistani government version of the conspiracy, including Sheikh Mujib’s multiple meetings with Lieut. Commander Muazzam Hossain, Ahmed Fazlur Rahman CSP, Ruhul Quddus CSP and some leading co-accused in Karachi, Dhaka and Chittagong during 1964–1966.²⁰

According to the prosecution (the Pakistan government) leading “conspirators” or leaders of the separatist movement had six meetings with P.N. Ojha, First Secretary of the Indian High Commission stationed in Dhaka at his office in 1966 and 1967.

Ojha gave them money and assurance of Indian support, including arms and ammunition, for the separation of East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib is said to have disbursed money to some of the co-accused up to his arrest. Although Moudud Ahmed finds loopholes in the Pakistani charge sheet against Mujib and his co-accused in the Case, nevertheless, he does not question the merit of the prosecution case.²¹ Interestingly, Mujib and all his co-accused in the Case vehemently denied any involvement in a secessionist movement to separate the eastern wing of Pakistan from the centre.²² According to witness Flight Lieutenant Mirza Muhammad Ramiz, Muazzam and his men had a blueprint for independent Bangladesh, where all properties would be acquired by the state, industries nationalized and currency replaced by coupons. The witness also told the Special Tribunal that Muazzam’s group had designed the national flag of Bangladesh, in gold and green.²³

Although Mujib was involved in the “conspiracy” to liberate East Pakistan, Lieut. Commander Muazzam Hossain was the mastermind of the failed project. Moudud Ahmed believes that while Muazzam “wanted to broaden his base but at the same time wanted to retain the leadership in his own hand,” Mujib “knowing that his strength was much bigger than this group, gave them his blessings in order to maintain a sort of political influence over them,” that “as they were talking for East Pakistan, Mujib could not but support them” and that he used to help them financially “with the object of having political influence over their activities Mujib thereby acted as a restraining force over the group keeping his own political objective insight.”²⁴ As Moudud Ahmed puts it, the Agartala Conspiracy Case “had some grains of truth in it.” Quite a large number of Bengalis, especially intellectuals in East Pakistan, began thinking in terms of secession in the mid-1960s. “The proceedings of the case thus helped surface the feelings which had so long been nurtured secretly.”²⁵ The mass upsurge in early 1969 forced Ayub Khan to withdraw the Conspiracy Case and release Mujib and other co-accused on 22 February 1969.

Here a note on Maulana Bhashani is in order to understand Pakistan politics during the late 1960s to early 1970s. His unpredictable and anarchic political behaviour fitted like a glove to the temperament of the “primitive

rebels” or peasants, whose politics being inseparable from acts of “social banditry,”²⁶ in East Pakistan too. He successfully mobilized peasants and working-class people with his *jhalao* (burn down) and gherao tactics against actual or presumed enemies “in order to destroy and transform” society, in the Hobsbawmian sense of the expression.²⁷ Various factions of the pro-Chinese communists in East Pakistan, who had been with the Maulana since the 1950s—one is, however, not sure who were calling the shots—being over-enthused after the government law enforcement agencies had been paralysed in rural East Pakistan, wanted the formation of “Revolutionary Committees in every locality to take over governmental control.” One cannot agree more with Maniruzzaman that “while pro-Peking firebrands could rouse public wrath against people’s enemies, they had neither the cadre strength nor a planned action programme to carry the revolution forward.”²⁸ Bengali communists’ romantic adventures with revolutions failed at least twice before in the twentieth century, once during the Tebhaga Movement (1946–1947) and afterwards during the Language Movement in East Pakistan, 1948–1952.²⁹ As Bhashani’s five-year-long truce, if not honeymoon, with Ayub Khan (1963–1968) was disastrous for the left politics in East Pakistan, so was his decision not to take part in the national elections of 1970. This decision virtually gave Sheikh Mujib and his party a walkover in the polls in East Pakistan. Instead of contesting the polls, he asked his followers to boycott them; their main slogan being: *Voter Agey Bhat Chai* (Food Before the Polls). Then again, he was very ambivalent too. As Pakistan’s new military ruler Yahya Khan had invited all major politicians to address the nation over national radio to place their election manifestos to the people, so did Bhashani also address the nation like others placing his National Awami Party’s manifesto to the people, in Urdu and Bengali.

However, unlike Bhashani’s and his followers’ anarchic and radical behaviour across East Pakistan, their infantile move to stage a revolutionary class war against Pakistani capitalist classes, in particular, Mujib’s strategy to take part in the elections on the basis of his Six-Point Programme was a pragmatic move as it was acceptable to the Bengalis at large, and to the Pakistani authorities as well. Thus, at the end of the day, it was Mujib, not Bhashani who emerged as the undisputed leader of the people in East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) in the wake of the parliamentary elections in December 1970. One may surmise that had Bhashani called off his *jhalao*-

gherao movement (which had virtually paralysed the civil administration in East Pakistan) after Mujib's and his co-prisoners' release on the 22 February, there would not have been another martial law in Pakistan, and there would have been a peaceful transfer of power by Ayub Khan to an elected government. Most importantly, there would not have been any Bangladesh, at least not when it happened in 1971! If we draw a parallel between the emergence of Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971, it appears that while Jinnah called the shot by mobilizing mass support for Pakistan through Muslim elites in the 1940s, in Bengal and elsewhere in the Subcontinent; in East Pakistan, while Mujib was in jail (1966–1969), Bengali student leaders mobilized mass support for fully autonomous/independent Bangladesh. After Mujib's release on 22 February 1969, "leftist" student leaders, especially, Serajul Alam Khan, eventually convincingly persuaded Mujib to speak their language.

Afterwards, Mujib participated in the Parliamentary Elections of 1970 by agreeing to abide by Yahya Khan's Legal Frame Work Order (which stipulated the integrity of Pakistan) to draft the Constitution.

The understanding between Mujib and Yahya was so good that the former wanted the latter to continue as the President of Pakistan under the Mujib-led Awami League government. Most interestingly, Archer Blood, the US Consul-General in East Pakistan in 1971, writes in his long confidential letter to the US State Department on 29 January 1971 that the "possible officeholders in an AL government" would include the following people in key positions of the administration:

| Post | Name |
|---|--|
| Prime Minister | Sheikh Mujibur Rahman |
| President | A.M. Yahya Khan |
| Speaker of National Assembly | Zahiruddin Ahmed, AL MNA (Member of National Assembly) |
| Foreign Minister | Dr Kamal Hossain, AL MNA |
| Important Ministry | Syed Nazrul Islam, AL MNA |
| Finance Minister or Economic Planning Chief | Rehman Sobhan, Leftist economist at Dacca University |
| Commerce Minister | Matiur Rahman or M.R. Siddiqui, both AL MNAs ³⁰ |

The same document also reveals that Captain Mansur Ali, AL MPA (Member of Provincial Assembly) from Pabna would become the Chief Minister of East Pakistan, and Kamruddin Ahmed, a Dhaka attorney, and Alamgir Rahman, ESSO General Manager (East Pakistan), would hold important diplomatic positions under the Awami League government. Both Ahmed and Rahman were Mujib's advisers.³¹ Interestingly, Tajuddin Ahmed's name is missing from the list of officeholders in the proposed Awami League government. He was a very influential close associate of Mujib, who headed the Bangladesh government-in-exile during Mujib's incarceration in 1971. Had Mujib envisioned an independent Bangladesh, even in late 1970, he would not have selected Mansur Ali and Abdur Razzaq—among some other important leaders of his party—to run the government of East Pakistan as a province of united Pakistan.

There are multiple claims about Mujib's quest for an independent Bangladesh—by Mujib himself and others—but one is not sure if Mujib had really told renowned Indian Bengali writer Manoj Basu in Beijing in 1956 that one day he (Mujib) would separate East Bengal from the state of Pakistan.³² There are stories about Mujib's alleged contact with some co-accused of the Agartala Conspiracy Case (1968–1969) who wanted the separation of East Pakistan from the western wing of the country. The Conspiracy Case filed by the Pakistan government was all about thirty-odd Bengali military and civilian employees of the Pakistan government and Mujib himself, who were said to be involved in a conspiracy to separate East Pakistan from the western wing of the country through armed rebellion with Indian support. Mujib, however, denied his involvement in any such conspiracy, and nothing was proven against him. Nevertheless, after his party had won the majority of seats in Pakistan's National Assembly (160 out of the total 300), Mujib was apparently more interested in becoming the Prime Minister of united Pakistan rather than lending support for independent East Bengal or Bangladesh, championed by the separatist leaders of the Awami League and its student front. Meanwhile, as discussed above, he had assured Ayub Khan that his Six-Point-based Constitution would further strengthen the national integration of Pakistan.

Within minutes after Yahya's decision to prorogue the Assembly session was broadcast on radio on 1 March 1971, the radical student front of the Awami League unilaterally declared the independence of Bangladesh.

Yahya did so to make Mujib and Bhutto come to an agreement to frame the government in Pakistan. Despite his weaker position with eighty-eight seats in the national assembly against Mujib's 160, Bhutto wanted a say in the framing of the Constitution. The student leaders did not wait to hear the last word from Mujib in this regard. The next day, radical leaders of the Students' League hoisted the tricolour—red, green and gold/yellow—the national flag of Bangladesh, which had been designed by Agartala conspirators in the 1960s.³³ Meanwhile, instead of saying he wanted an independent Bangladesh, following Yahya's speech on 1 March, Mujib asked Yahya to fulfill his four conditions, which were: "immediate withdrawal of martial law; the Army's return to barracks; a judicial inquiry into the loss of life caused by Army's action; and immediate transfer of power [to him] i.e. before the Assembly met or could frame a constitution."³⁴

Even on the eve of the genocidal military crackdown by Pakistan on 25 March 1971, Mujib gave mixed signals about his real intent in regard to Pakistan and Bangladesh. He told his close associates to get out of Dhaka, and refused to make a unilateral declaration of independence. He was possibly still thinking of some understanding with Islamabad on some sort of agreement between the two wings of Pakistan under unified Pakistan. However, multiple sources on events and roles of some important actors during the Bangladesh crisis in 1971—apparently, all look authentic or "first-hand reports"—often give contradictory information. For example, we find Yahya Khan's ambivalence in regard to Mujib's role in the crisis. On 30 September he told US Congressman Frelinghuysen in Islamabad that Mujib had been planning secession, with Indian and certain other countries' help, and refrained from commenting on Mujib's fate, "a case which is before the courts."³⁵ Interestingly, in October 1971, in accordance with the public opinion in Pakistan, the Yahya administration indicated it was willing to release Mujib and negotiate with him provided he agreed to support unified Pakistan.³⁶ Kissinger also reveals in an interview in 2016, that in November 1971 Yahya Khan told President Nixon that he was willing to grant East Pakistan complete independence by March 1972.³⁷ Last but not least, in his confidential affidavit placed with the Lahore High Court after his release from house arrest by Zia ul-Haq in 1978, Yahya blamed Bhutto, not Mujib, for breaking up Pakistan:

It was Bhutto, not Mujib, who broke Pakistan. Bhutto's stance in 1971 and his stubbornness harmed Pakistan's solidarity much more than Sheikh Mujib's six-point demand. It was his high ambitions and rigid stance that led to rebellion in East Pakistan. He riled up the Bengalis and brought an end to Pakistan's solidarity. East Pakistan broke away.³⁸

In hindsight, it appears that Yahya Khan's offer to Mujib to negotiate for a peaceful settlement of the crisis in September/October and his willingness to grant East Pakistan complete independence by March 1972 (as Kissinger alludes to Yahya's message to Nixon in November 1971) came too late for a peaceful settlement of the civil war-cum-Liberation War for Bangladesh, from someone like Yahya Khan (who said in his 1978 affidavit that he had been just "used like a pawn in a chess game" by hawkish Pakistani generals) had no power to negotiate anything with anybody vis-à-vis the fate of East Pakistan from early 1971 till his removal by Bhutto in December 1971. The Cold War exigencies also demanded that the Soviet Union and its ally India, take the decisive role in weakening Pakistan militarily and economically by breaking up the country, which was too friendly to Washington and Beijing for comfort to Moscow and New Delhi. Thus, one should not lose sight of other dimensions of the East and West Pakistan conflict, which transcended the civil war between the two wings of the country and the Liberation War for East Bengal. The separation of East Pakistan or the independence of Bangladesh also signalled the first major victory for the Soviet Union against the US after Cuba, in the four and a half decade-long Cold War between the two superpowers. Actually, Mujib tried his best to keep Pakistan united. By late February Mujib almost gave up all hope about getting any help from Yahya Khan (who himself was a puppet at the hands of pro-Bhutto hawkish generals), and on 28 February 1971 asked Ambassador Farland about "U.S. aid to an independent East Pakistan and as the lever to prevent West Pakistan from intervening militarily."³⁹

Mujib is said to have told US Ambassador Farland in early March 1971 that he (Mujib) did not want an independent Bangladesh but a Federation of Pakistan for the Bengalis, where they would live as equal citizens rather than as colonized people. He even requested Ambassador Farland to make Yahya Khan transfer power to him as Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Ambassador Farland told him “not to look towards Washington for any help for his secessionist game.”⁴⁰ He was also worried about his own security from the radical elements in the Awami League.⁴¹ Interestingly, Major General Khadim Hussain Raja (who was the General Officer Command in East Pakistan in 1971) also believes that Mujib did not want an independent Bangladesh:

Early in the evening of 6 March, ... a Bengali gentleman, came to my residence and asked to see me He said that he was a close confidant of Sheikh Mujib who had sent him to plead with me. Sheikh Mujib’s message, briefly, was that he was under great pressure from the extremists and student leaders within the party to declare unilateral declaration of independence during his public address on the afternoon of 7 March. Sheikh Mujib claimed that he was a patriot and did not want any responsibility for the break-up of Pakistan. He, therefore, wanted me to take him into protective custody and confine him to the cantonment. For this, he wanted me to send a military escort to fetch him from his Dhanmandi residence.⁴²

According to General Raja, Sheikh Mujib did not give up. He sent two emissaries to him around 2 a.m. on 7 March, who conveyed the same message to him. Mujib wanted the Pakistan Army to take him into protective custody.⁴³ Another Pakistani Army officer corroborates General Raja’s and US Ambassador Farland’s accounts with regard to Mujib’s desire to be in Pakistan Army’s protective custody to save himself from the radical elements in his party who wanted him to make the unilateral declaration of independence of Bangladesh.⁴⁴ It is noteworthy that “there was a secret deal, again through the good offices of the American officials, ensuring that Mujib’s life would be protected” before he surrendered to the Pakistan Army on 26 March 1971, reveals G.W. Choudhury who was a minister in the Yahya administration (1969–1971). He believes that although “the Pakistan Army was out to eliminate other top Awami Leaguers, including Tajuddin, and their families, Mujib and his family were treated in a strangely pleasant way by the Army.”⁴⁵ Arguably, Mujib proved to be a “patriotic Pakistani” even after the Pakistani military crackdown on 25 March 1971, despite his alleged involvement in the Agartala Conspiracy

and his commitment to an independent Bangladesh. Mujib's dubious commitment to Bangladesh before the National Assembly Elections in 1970 was no longer relevant when he had the vision of himself as future PM of unified Pakistan. Soon after the 1971 elections, President Yahya also publicly mentioned him as the next Prime Minister in Dhaka.

Thus, it is difficult to agree with Stanley Wopert that even before the National Assembly elections in December 1970, Mujib told an under-cover Pakistani intelligence officer (who is said to have allegedly taped the conversation): "My aim is to establish Bangladesh. I will tear the LFO [Legal Framework Order] into pieces as soon as the elections are over."⁴⁶ The LFO from Yahya Khan on 28 March 1970 outlines the procedures for the election as well as considerations for how Pakistan will be governed in the future. According to the plan, Pakistan would remain an Islamic Republic and all four provinces in West Pakistan would remain autonomous units, as would East Pakistan.

During Mujib's years of incarceration, Bengali youths and students virtually captured the political arena in East Pakistan. By the early 1960s, there were various leftist, pro-Bengali, liberal democrat, Islamic and pro-Pakistani student organizations in East Pakistan. In the 1960s, two divergent streams of nationalist/separatist had been flowing in East Pakistan: one under the motley groups of leftist labour, peasant and student leaders, from Mohammad Toha to Deben Shikdar, and from Kazi Zafar to Rashed Khan Menon, Mahbubullah, Mustafa Jamal Haider and multiple underground leaders, with the blessings of Maulana Bhashani; and another under Mujib and other senior leaders of the Awami League. However, as mentioned above, the meteoric rise of the "leftist" and pro-Bangladesh youths from the student wing of the Awami League under Serajul Alam Khan, ASM Abdur Rab and others in 1969 mesmerized the bulk of the Student League members, who later turned the table. From early 1969, they openly demanded complete independence for East Pakistan or Bangladesh. They played a vital role in the massive Awami League victory at the National Assembly Elections in 1970.

However, Serajul Alam Khan (b.1940), who maintained a low profile, emerged as the Dada or elder brother in the pro-Mujib Student League. He had his own secret cell, aka the *Nucleus*, which from the early 1960s onwards secretly recruited and indoctrinated Bengali students as core members of the secessionist movement in East Pakistan. The bulk of Dada's

Nucleus members came from the lower-middle-class families. By early 1969, members of the *Nucleus* started espousing radical Bengali Nationalism and even “scientific socialism.” Some core members of the Dada’s *Nucleus* comes from his home district Greater Noakhali. By 1969 the core of the *Nucleus* started espousing fascist ideas to promote Bengali chauvinism. During the anti-Ayub student movement in 1969, they raised pro-Liberation and fascistic slogans against non-Bengalis aka *Bihari* or *Maura*; one blatantly fascistic slogan being “*Ekta-duita maura dhoru, Shakal bikal nashta koro*” (Catch a *maura* or two, and eat them up)! This writer recalls graffiti on walls in and around Dhaka University campus, which read “Bengalis are the best among the races.” Most importantly, the *Nucleus* designed the national flag, selected Tagore’s *Amar Sonar Bangla* as the national anthem, coined a new slogan replacing *Pakistan Zindabad* (Long Live Pakistan) by *Jai Bangla* (Victory to Bengal), and almost overnight espoused “scientific socialism” as the motto of the Student League, which later Mujib as Prime Minister adopted as one of the four-state ideologies of Bangladesh.

The re-appraisal of the Mujib-Serajul Alam relationship resolves many ambiguities about their respective roles in the creation of Bangladesh. This is a fascinating account of how Dada (Serajul Alam Khan) created the *Nucleus* along with three other student leaders at the Iqbal Hall (a dormitory of Dhaka University) in 1962, leading to the creation of Bangladesh in less than ten years. Dada’s account, however, often contradicts the facts. The Pakistani government arrested some top leaders of the East Pakistan Liberation Front (EPLF), including Shah Muazzem Hussain and Fazlul Haque Moni in 1961. In late 1962, Dada founded his *Nucleus* in order to spearhead the movement for independent Bangladesh. Dada worked closely with Abdur Razzaq, Kazi Aref Ahmed and Abul Kalam Azad, three other student leaders who supported the Awami League.⁴⁷ This writer recalls visiting Serajul Alam Khan at Iqbal Hall as a first-year student of Dhaka College in 1965. During a very brief period, he was this writer’s political guru. He spoke about the Liberation of East Pakistan.

Dada describes the clandestine *Nucleus*’ avowed goal of liberating East Pakistan in his autobiography, including the design of a national flag and coining of a national slogan, *Jai Bangla* (Victory to Bengal). Mujib was imprisoned between May 1966 and February 1969 for his alleged involvement in conspiracies to separate East Pakistan from Pakistan. In his

statement, Dada affirms that Mujib did not know the aims and objectives of the *Nucleus* until his release from jail in early 1969. Moreover, Dada reveals that Mujib was against *Jai Bangla* and had reservations about having a national flag for Bangladesh.⁴⁸ According to Dada, after winning the 1970 election, Mujib introduced Chittaranjan Sutar (1928–2002) to him and several of his associates. Sutar was a leader of the Awami League, later elected as an MP from Pirojpur in 1973. During his absence (Mujib's), Mujib asked Dada, Fazlul Haque Moni, Abdur Razzaq and Tofael Ahmed to keep in touch with Sutar. Most of the time, Sutar lived in Kolkata. Mujib reportedly told Dada and his associates to memorize Sutar's Kolkata address. Dada also reveals that all arrangements were made to collect arms and train Bengalis to fight for the Liberation of Bangladesh by late 1970.⁴⁹

However, Dada contradicts himself. His statement says Mujib completely rejected both the *Jai Bangla* slogan or designing a national flag for Bangladesh in 1970–1971, but additionally suggests Mujib introduced Chittaranjan Sutar to him and his colleagues in order to wage war against Pakistan. In addition, as mentioned above, Sutar later fought against Bangladesh and fought on behalf of the separatist *Swadhin Bangabhumii Andolon* to create a Hindu Homeland by carving out several Bangladeshi districts.⁵⁰ In addition, multiple credible sources (cited above) prove beyond doubt that Mujib never intended to unilaterally declare Bangladesh's independence. In March 1971, Mujib requested the US Ambassador to Pakistan (Farland) to influence Yahya Khan to transfer power to Mujib or to take him into custody to save his life from the separatists in his party. He also sent emissaries to General Khadim Hussain Raja (General Officer Commanding (GOC), 14th Division of the Pakistan Army in Dhaka) on 6 March and 7 March, pleading with him to take him into safe custody to save his life. Thus, it appears that by March 1971, it was not Mujib, but Bhutto and the rabidly anti-Bengali Pakistani generals and Tajuddin's and Serajul Alam Khan's followers, who worked for the dismemberment of Pakistan. Certain external factors also played an important role in the creation of Bangladesh. It was the Soviet Union and India that played a crucial role in this regard.

After Bhutto and hawkish Pakistani generals refused to transfer power to Mujib in March 1971 or any time afterwards, things moved towards India's original design to dismember Pakistan through accelerated military intervention, which on 3 December forced Pakistan to declare war against

India. And the rest is history. Putting aside the myths surrounding Bengali freedom fighters' contribution to the Liberation of Bangladesh, we can agree on the facts: Rather than Bengali freedom fighters or insurgents (with grenades, sten-guns and .303 Enfield rifles), it was the Indian armed forces who defeated the Pakistani armed forces, decisively, on 16 December 1971. Most importantly, India also wanted to dismember Pakistan to save its Northeast from getting separated from India. Indian security analyst Subir Bhaumik believes that China and Pakistan planned to cut off India's Northeast from India. Thus, the East Bengali revolt gave India the golden opportunity to cut off East Pakistan from its western wing so that Pakistan would not be in a position to arm, train and provide sanctuary to Assamese, Naga, Mizo and Manipuri insurgents in East Pakistan.⁵¹ One of India's top intelligence officers, B. Raman, who worked for the RAW, reveals the "five-fold role" of RAW in the creation of Bangladesh:

Provision of intelligence to the policy-makers and the armed forces; to train the Bengali freedom fighters in clandestine training camps; to network with Bengali public servants from East Pakistan posted in West Pakistan and in Pakistan's diplomatic missions abroad and persuade them to co-operate with the freedom-fighters and to help in the freedom struggle by providing intelligence; to mount a special operation in the CHT against the sanctuaries and training camps of the Naga and Mizo hostiles; and to organize a psychological warfare (PSYWAR) campaign against the Pakistani rulers by disseminating reports about the massacres of the Bengalis in East Pakistan and the exodus of refugees.⁵²

Although Mujib had reservations about the national flag and *Jai Bangla* slogan, he was simply outvoted by Dada and his radical "national socialists." However, Mujib never yielded to their pressure, and refrained from making any unilateral declaration of independence, ever. He actually outwitted them all, including Tajuddin Ahmed and Dada. Mujib was an expert at telling people what they wanted to hear or expected to hear from him. He presented himself as a patriotic Pakistani to Pakistanis who opposed the dismemberment of their country. For the radical pro-Bangladeshi elements in his party, he often played the role of an ultra-Bengali nationalist. It was one thing to usurp the authorship of the Six-Pont

Programme, and on the other, it was another thing to assure both Yahya and Ayub about his credentials as a patriotic Pakistani. During the Liberation War, Dada and his supporters were very close to the Indian government and generals, who raised an exclusive group of freedom fighters as members of the *Mujib Bahini*.⁵³ Dada had a close relationship with Chittaranjan Sutar that after the Liberation he would frequently visit Sutar in Kolkata and stay with him. Dada was at Sutar's Kolkata residence on the day Mujib was killed in 1975. Moudud Ahmed explains this very succinctly:

While Mujib failed to check the process of dismemberment of Pakistan, Bhutto deliberately and calculatedly accelerated the same. Mujib failed, because he lost control over his young radical nationalist forces and Bhutto succeeded because the scheme suited the racial and colonial aspirations of the West Pakistani ruling class To the class he presented, Pakistan had to remain under a strong central government as before where East Pakistan would only be used as a market. Otherwise it had to break up. For them there was no solution in between.⁵⁴

Significantly, on 1 March 1971, the day President Yahya Khan prorogued the first session of the National Assembly—which was supposed to meet in Dhaka on 3 March—to resolve some issues between Mujib and Bhutto on the future Constitution of Pakistan, radical leaders and workers of the Student League were first to come out on streets declaring the independence of Bangladesh. And soon, Bengali goons attacked non-Bengalis, killed many of them and looted their property. They did this with impunity up to the 25 March. The day after, they raised the national flag of Bangladesh and even forced Mujib to raise it in public. It was simply a case of what happens when ordinary people go much ahead of the leader.

Afterwards, not only till the Liberation, but also in its wake, pro-Awami League student and youth leaders continued to call the shots to the utter dismay of Patriarch Mujib. He had to embrace socialism and secularism as state ideologies. In the meantime, lumpen bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariats (whom Marx despised most as opportunistic and counter-revolutionary elements) staged the Bangladesh Revolution by—sort of—forcing the Pakistan Army to retaliate against Bengalis during the nine-month-long Liberation War in 1971, in the most brutal manner. They

virtually staged a reign of terror and anarchy across East Pakistan between 1 March and 25 March, which made it impossible for Mujib, Bhutto and Yahya to come up with a compromise formula to save the integrity of Pakistan. Serajul Alam Khan and his followers had two ideological commitments: a) the eventual merger of East Bengal with India; and b) until that was achieved, destabilize the Mujib government in all possible ways, including armed insurrections in the name of establishing national socialism. It is noteworthy that, Serajul Alam Khan or Dada, and his lumpen radical followers, in less than one year after the Liberation established the Jatiya Samajtantric Dal (National Socialist Party) (JSD) or the National Socialist Party of Bangladesh, which interestingly enough, had striking similarities with Hitler's National Socialist Party (Nazi Party), at least in the name.

Meanwhile, Mujib's 7 March speech in 1971, which was not a declaration of independence (albeit with lots of ambiguities in the text), was a corollary of the mass upsurge that began across East Pakistan on 1 March 1971, after President Yahya Khan's speech declaring the postponement of the first session of the national assembly of Pakistan in Dhaka, scheduled for 3 March. On 7 March, Mujib launched a Gandhian non-violent non-cooperation movement against the Yahya administration. He also uttered the following words: "This time our struggle is for our emancipation. This time our struggle is for our independence." This part of the speech is said to have been drafted by the enigmatic student leader, Serajul Alam Khan. As ASM Abdur Rab—who was the Vice-President of the Dhaka University Central Student Union (DUCSU) in 1970–1971 and a prominent associate of Serajul Alam Khan and a leader of the Liberation War—reveals in an interview on 1 March 2016: "While Mujib was the *known leader* and Serajul Alam Khan was the *unknown leader, architect and organiser of the movement for Bangladesh from 1966 onward, through his Nucleus*, the latter was instrumental in drafting the 7 March 1971 speech by Mujib." He wanted Mujib to specify in his speech that the East Bengalis' struggle was for their "emancipation" and for their "independence" in a particular order, "emancipation" to be followed by "independence."⁵⁵ Rab also mentions that the first flag of Bangladesh with a golden map of the country on the red circle on the green background was designed in Room # 116 of the Iqbal Hall (later re-named Sergeant Zahurul Haq Hall) of Dhaka University in mid-1970. He gives another important piece of information that excepting

Sheikh Mujib, Tajuddin Ahmed, Abdul Aziz of Chittagong, Serajul Alam Khan, Abdur Razzaq, Shahjahan Siraj and Rab himself, nobody else in the Awami League neither publicly mentioned “Bangladesh” nor was aware of their plans to achieve Bangladesh by violent means.⁵⁶ However, what Rab or any close associate of Mujib do not talk about publicly is that Mujib finished his historic speech of 7 March with two slogans, “*Jai Bangla*” (Victory to Bengal) and “*Jai Pakistan*” (Victory to Pakistan). Senior freedom fighter Air Vice Marshal A.K. Khondkar, poet Shamsur Rahman, journalist Nirmal Sen, freedom fighter Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury and many others assert that Mujib ended his speech by wishing victory to both Bangladesh and Pakistan.⁵⁷

Shahjahan Siraj, a close associate of Serajul Alam Khan and a leader of the Liberation War, corroborates another student leader, Abdur Rab’s story about a handful of Student League leaders who designed and prepared the first national flag of Bangladesh at Iqbal Hall in mid-1970. They decided to insert the map of Bangladesh in the flag to invalidate what the Pakistan government would later try to discredit the Liberation War as an “Indian design” to annex East Pakistan. Most importantly, Siraj reveals that they presented the flag to Mujib at his residence on 7 June 1970, which the latter accepted with a grin.⁵⁸

Politicians have their antics and shenanigans. Mujib was not free from them. He loved power, most of them do. Then again, he was dubious, duplicitous, narcissistic and Machiavellian at the same time. Above all, he simultaneously tried to appease everyone for the sake of power, from the hawkish Pakistani generals to the rabid Bengali nationalists/pro-Liberation elements in his party. When convenient, he would tell West Pakistani leaders he was a die-hard Pakistani, and the Awami League had been a party of “freedom fighters for Pakistan,”⁵⁹ and would flirt with Agartala conspirators, and would keep radical pro-independence student leaders in good humour by raising the Bangladesh flag and publicly, sort of, declaring the independence of Bangladesh, on 7 March 1971. On the fateful 25 March 1971, although Mujib is said to have advised his party people to go underground or flee, he himself did not go anywhere and was waiting for his arrest by the Pakistan Army after receiving a telephone call from someplace, writes pro-Mujib journalist M.R Akhter Mukul.⁶⁰ Interestingly, although the Pakistani Occupation Army in 1971 did kill tens of thousands of Bengalis in Bangladesh, the Yahya administration took good care of

Mujib's family; lodged them in a nice house, provided full-time security, sustenance and a chauffeur-driven motor vehicle.

We may agree with Begum Akhter Suleman (Mujib's late mentor HS Suhrawardy's daughter) who felt that "after the 23 March [1971], a definite change had come over the Sheikh" and that Mujib had embarked on a "disastrous course" (opted for independent Bangladesh).⁶¹ By then Mujib might have been frustrated by Yahya's dillydallying and Bhutto's intransigence. However, his public assertion to the press on 24 March about progress being made in the tripartite talk between himself, Yahya and Bhutto reflected his sincerity and optimism about a peaceful resolution of the problem of the transfer of power from a military to a civilian administration. He was still hoping he would become the Prime Minister of unified Pakistan. In this backdrop Moudud Ahmed (who was once his adviser and a close confidant of Mujib) seems to have rightly assessed Mujib's stand as late as 24 March, which was all about his desire to become the Prime Minister of Pakistan. He rejects what Mujib publicly claimed after the Liberation about his so-called role in the creation of Bangladesh, in self-glorification:

After independence Mujib started making such and many other assertions only to cover the fact that he did not take part in the independence war and did not clearly declare independence. To assert his position further Mujib once told me after the independence that he even had a clandestine office in New Delhi for several years. This also had no truth in it. Every Awami League leader I talked to including Tajuddin denied this propaganda as to be true.⁶²

Interestingly, what Prince Sadruddin Agha Khan, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, revealed to some US State Department officials on 23 November 1971 about Yahya, Mujib, Bhutto and Pakistani generals in regard to the Bangladesh crisis was very revealing. The Prince informed State Department officials that after his long meetings with A.K. Brohi (Mujib's defence counsel) he was convinced that Mujib might not have wanted independent Bangladesh and said: "Even today he [Mujib] wants unified Pakistan." Sadruddin also believed that Yahya was "completely wrong" in assuming that had he (Yahya) transferred power to

Mujib, his (Yahya's) own people would kill Mujib because only Bhutto was against transferring power to Mujib. What is even more revealing that even India, which being unable to fully control the Bangladeshi government in exile in India due to its internal conflicts, by November 1971, was willing to accept a peaceful resolution to the East Pakistan crisis through the good offices of the UN Secretary-General. Most significantly, Sadruddin revealed that Yahya had realized that there was no military solution to the crisis and his "trump card" would be Brohi's success in proving Mujib's "innocence" from the Pakistani viewpoint, which would rehabilitate Mujib in the arena of Pakistan politics.⁶³ However, we know this did not happen. Hawkish generals and Bhutto prevailed. One, however, believes that what Yahya is said to have told Nixon in November 1971 about his (Yahya's) willingness to grant independence to East Pakistan by March 1972 reflected his desire to avoid a military confrontation with India, which he had earlier explained to Nixon would be disastrous for Pakistan.⁶⁴

There are at least two versions of how Mujib "declared" the independence of Bangladesh: through the EPR transmitter, and through some East Pakistan police device. Surprisingly, neither the Hamoodur Rahman Commission nor Yahya Khan ever connected Mujib with declaring independence unilaterally on 26 March!

The Pakistan Army had neutralized the EPR Headquarters in Dhaka by the evening of March 25, which makes Dowlah's rejection of Mujib's so-called Declaration of Independence with equal sense. A prominent leader of the Awami League, M.R. Siddiqui of Chittagong acknowledged not having spoken to Mujib after 7 p.m. on 25 March.⁶⁵ And that Mujib did not declare the Independence is also evident from the Government of Pakistan's *White Paper on the Crisis of East Pakistan* (1971) which accuses Mujib of plotting "a conspiracy with India an uprising that was to take East Bengal out of the Republic of Pakistan," but it does not accuse him of declaring independence. He only made a "veiled call for independence" on 7 March 1971 but was not prepared to face any charge of leading a secessionist/separatist movement against Pakistan.⁶⁶ Mujib wanted independent Bangladesh with direct US support, and when it was denied, he tried hard just for maximum autonomy for East Pakistan in a unified Pakistan. And, his pragmatism is evident from nominating some senior and important Awami League leaders to contest the elections of the provincial legislature in East Pakistan. Thus, Mansur Ali and Abdur Razzaq, among

others, were nominated and elected as members of the Provincial Assembly, while far less prominent Awami league members got elected as MNAs or Members of the National Assembly of Pakistan. It appears that Mujib wanted Mansur Ali to head the provincial government of East Pakistan under unified Pakistan.

Mujib made a lot of half-truths and untruths in his first speech in Dhaka after he returned from Pakistan on 10 January 1972. Apart from claiming that the Yahya regime had prepared Mujib's grave in Pakistan, he claimed that he had told Bhutto days before his return to Bangladesh that he (Mujib) was not interested in having any connections with Pakistan. There is evidence, however, which contradicts his claims that he declared the independence of Bangladesh on 26 March 1971 or ever, and even refused to sign a draft prepared by Tajuddin Ahmed or record his Declaration of Independence on 25 March because Mujib feared treason trials by Pakistan. Tajuddin asked Mujib to record or sign his declaration of independence, and to accompany him to a safe sanctuary. Mujib replied: "Go home and sleep tight, I have declared a general strike on March 27th."⁶⁷ He never declared independence on 26 March, and was actually arrested on 25 March, before midnight.⁶⁸ Dada claims that Mujib sent a message to the Bengali nation through some unknown East Pakistani police device on 25 March: "The enemy has struck us. Hit them back. Victory is ours, Insha Allah [Godwilling]. Joy Bangla. Mujibur Rahman." Awami League MP Dr Kamal Hussain is said to have drafted the message. As Dada continues, "Mujib Bhai [Brother Mujib] informed me that they [the Pakistanis] would attack us the next day [25 March] Don't tell anyone, I'll stay home. They [Pakistanis] would behave like lunatics if they don't find me at home."⁶⁹ One believes Mujib did not declare the independence of Bangladesh on 26 March or ever.

An undercover Pakistani police inspector Raja Anar Khan, who served Mujib as his cook and valet during his days of incarceration in Pakistan, reveals some interesting information about what Mujib told Bhutto who came to see him in his prison cell soon after the emergence of Bangladesh. Mujib being totally uninformed about what happened during the entire period of his detention was shocked to hear from Bhutto on 20 December 1971 that he had become the President and Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan after the fall of East Pakistan to India. He told Bhutto: "How could you become the President? I have the right to become

the President as the leader of the majority party, not you. Take me immediately to a radio and TV station so that I can restore East Pakistan as before and fix everything.” The undercover police inspector also reveals that Mujib’s attorney A.K. Brohi used to come to Mujib’s prison cell and assured him that nothing would happen to him as their charges brought against him by the Yahya administration were very flimsy. They would not be able to prove Mujib to be a traitor against Pakistan.⁷⁰ Interestingly, Mujib is said to have blamed Tajuddin for the creation of Bangladesh. Soon after his arrival at the Dhaka Airport on 10 January 1972 from Pakistan, the former told the latter: “Tajuddin , so, you people finally broke Pakistan!”⁷¹

The story of Bangladesh remains incomplete without acknowledging the facts that: (a) the Liberation War of 1971 was also a civil war between pro-and anti-Liberation forces among the Bengalis of East Pakistan; (b) there was also another dimension of the civil war, which was between ethnically/linguistically pro-Bangladesh Bengalis and ethnically/linguistically pro-Pakistan “Biharis” (non-Bengali Muslim immigrants from India to East Pakistan); (c) tens of thousands of “Biharis” got killed and expropriated, and their women raped, abducted and killed at the hands of pro-Bangladesh elements during March 1971 to early 1972; and most importantly, (d) contrary to the overblown myths about Bengali freedom fighters playing the decisive role in the Liberation of Bangladesh, the truth is somewhat very different—not-so-palatable for “patriotic” Bangladeshis—that less than 50,000 *muktijoddhas* (freedom fighters)—not well-armed and well-trained—were at best ineffective insurgents, and were never in a position to liberate a single small town in Bangladesh from the Pakistani occupation forces until early December 1971 when Pakistani troops were forced to evacuate due to India’s military pressure. In fact, the Indian armed forces fought the decisive battles in the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Mujib’s so-called pivotal role in the creation of Bangladesh is among the many myths about Bangladesh. He never declared independence. Following Yahya Khan’s fateful address over Radio Pakistan on 1 March 1971, declaring that Pakistan National Assembly’s first session was going to be prorogued sine die, thousands of Bengalis took to the streets to declare Bangladesh’s independence. Students supporting independence unfurled the National Flag of Bangladesh the next day and handed it over to Mujib. The crackdown by the Pakistani military on 25 March was preceded by twenty-

five days of anarchy in East Pakistan. Bengali nationalists organized massive violent street protests. They set fire to non-Bengali (or so-called Bihari) properties and the Pakistani national flag and raised the Bangladeshi flag on private and public buildings across East Pakistan. Mujib outsmarted his seniors, peers, over-rated and ambitious Young Turks, and followers, as shown above. He revived the Awami League in 1964, while senior party leaders preferred to suspend activities and maintain the National Democratic Front (NDF), which met periodically to seek restoration of democracy while Ayub Khan ruled Pakistan as a quasi-military dictator. The famous ambiguous speech he gave on 7 March 1971 also appeased the radical student leaders who wanted him to make the unilateral declaration of independence. It was he who succeeded in convincing Ayub and Yahya that he was a patriotic Pakistani rather than a champion of independent Bangladesh. Again, he outmanoeuvred and hoodwinked his party's radical elements into believing that Bangladesh was the proposal he was advocating. Was Mujib a demagogue without any commitment to create Bangladesh? We do not know. However, he cultivated links with diametrically opposed forces and people, including Indians, Pakistanis, Bengali nationalists and communists. Although he was the sole spokesperson for Bengali separatists, an avowed anti-Pakistani to India, and to Pakistani ruling elites, a patriotic Pakistani, his 7 March 1971 speech demonstrated he was a combination of opposites. The speech was simultaneously able to appease almost everyone, including Yahya Khan, Serajul Alam Khan, the Indian government and the vast majority of East Bengalis, as it had the substance to keep everyone happy. His non-committal demagoguery consolidated his position as the most important leader of East Bengal, but his inability to discipline his corrupt family members and cronies, along with his inadequate understanding of global politics, did no good to Bangladesh or to him during his brief term as Prime Minister/President. The rest is history!

Meanwhile, following Yahya Khan's fateful address over Radio Pakistan on 1st March 1971, declaring that the Pakistan National Assembly's first session would be prorogued sine die, thousands of Bengalis took to the streets to declare Bangladesh's independence. The next day, students supporting independence unfurled the national flag of Bangladesh and presented it to Mujib. East Pakistan was in anarchy for 25 days before the Pakistani military cracked down on 25th March. Bengali

nationalists organized massive violent street protests. They set fire to non-Bengali (or so-called Bihari) properties and the Pakistani national flag and raised the Bangladeshi flag on private and public buildings across East Pakistan. Mujib outsmarted his seniors, peers, over-rated and ambitious Young Turks, and followers, as shown above. Interestingly, Mujib's role in the creation of Bangladesh was ambiguous at times, especially his famous speech on 7th March 1971. The speech was somewhat ambiguous as it appeased both the Pakistani military administrators and radical Bengali students leaders under Serajul Alam Khan. The latter simply wanted him to make the unilateral declaration of independence. Even though Mujib never unambiguously stated that Bangladesh was independent, on 7th March 1971 he categorically told his people that any further killing of Bengalis by Pakistani soldiers would only allow them (Bengalis) one option: to fight for complete independence for Bangladesh. "Even if I am not here, you must resist the enemy and fight for independence," he declared emphatically. "Make each house a fortress. Regardless of what you have, you'll have to use it against the enemy [Pakistani armed forces]. God willing, I'll liberate the people of this country. Jai Bangla [victory to Bengal], Jai Pakistan [victory to Pakistan]." In sum, he left a lot of ambiguity through this historic speech.

It was Mujib who succeeded in convincing Yahya Khan that he was a patriotic Pakistani rather than a champion of independent Bangladesh. Mujib also pleaded not guilty to any work for the secession of East Pakistan from the Pakistani state during his trial in 1971. It is no wonder that, as cited above, Yahya Khan blamed Bhutto rather than Mujib for the disintegration of Pakistan! Mujib outmanoeuvred his party's radical elements into believing that Bangladesh was the proposal he was advocating. One may raise the question: Was Mujib a demagogue without any commitment to create Bangladesh? There is no definitive answer. One can neither glorify him as a hero nor demonise him as a villain, from the ardent Bangladeshi point of view. However, nobody can steal the thunder from him only because, in course of time during 1963 and 1971, he softened his stand on complete independence of East Bengal. He had every reason to be pragmatic to abandon the hazardous path of waging a separatist war against West Pakistan after winning the national elections of Pakistan in December 1970. He had legitimate reasons to believe that he would be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. It is noteworthy that he and his party did not

contest the National Elections to get a mandate from his people for a separate homeland or Bangladesh for them.

In terms of their roles in creating two new countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Mujib is comparable to Jinnah. Just as Jinnah had changed his strategies and been more than willing to compromise on the Partition until mid-1946, Mujib also tried to keep Pakistan united under him as its prime minister. Had Nehru and Congress Party leaders agreed to work on a federal united India with adequate autonomy to the Muslim-majority provinces in the federation, there would have been no Pakistan. While Jinnah was the “sole spokesman” for Indian Muslims, Mujib was not the same for Bengalis in East Pakistan. Even before the Pakistani Army crackdown on 25th March 1971, many of his close associates and senior leaders like Maulana Bhashani supported complete independence for East Pakistan or Bangladesh. In contrast, Mujib simply wanted complete autonomy and equal opportunities in a united Pakistan. After Mujib’s party won the majority of seats in the National Assembly, Pakistan’s rulers, including Yahya Khan, considered him a patriotic Pakistani. In early 1971, Yahya called Mujib the “future Prime Minister of Pakistan”.

In spite of that, his speech on 7th March revealed that he was a combination of opposites, while simultaneously appeasing both wings of Pakistan. He consolidated his position as the most important leader in East Bengal with his non-committal demagoguery. Bhutto and the hawkish Pakistani generals, who never wanted Pakistan to be ruled by the Bengali majority, had other ideas. Through the military crackdown of 25th March and the genocidal war in East Pakistan in 1971, they wrecked all prospects for a compromise between the two wings of Pakistan. Afterward, there was no turning back! In similar fashion to Jinnah, Mujib, despite his desire to keep Pakistan united, remains one of the founding fathers of Bangladesh. Unlike Jinnah, Mujib, however, was ambiguous and vacillating. Furthermore, he did not believe Yahya Khan would unleash Pakistan’s armed forces to wage a war of genocidal aggression against Bengalis. Consequently, Mujib was a leader by design, and one of the founding fathers of Bangladesh by default.

Footnotes

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4. The Decline and Fall of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 1972–1975

Taj Hashmi¹ 

(1) Hawaii, HI, USA

*“Dhora jabe na, chhoa jabe na, bola jabena katha! Rakto diye
pelam shalar emon swadhinata!”*
*(“Can’t hold, can’t touch, and can’t even open our mouth! What
bloody freedom it is, bought with so much of blood!”)*
—Abu Saleh (Abu Saleh, Paltaner Chhara, Mukktodhara, Dhaka
1975, p. 5.)
*“Where’s Siraj Sikdar today? I am constrained by my status
as the Father of the Nation, otherwise I would have ruthlessly
smothered my opponents!”*
—Sheikh Mujib (In the course of his speech in the Bangladesh
parliament on 25 January 1975, days after Siraj Sikdar’s
extrajudicial killing)

Keywords Seraj Sikdar – Rakkhi Bahini – BAKSAL – Mujibbad
(Mujibism) – Khondkar Mushtaque Ahmed – Moni Singh – Tajuddin –
Major Dalim – Bhashani – Gazi Gholam Mustafa – JSD – Major Jalil –
ASM Abdur Rab

An Autocracy’s Bad Start

Sheikh Mujib’s short tenure as Prime Minister and President of Bangladesh is remembered as a bad example of governance by one of the most charismatic and popular leaders of the Post-World War period in Asia, who could have been another Ho Chi Minh or Sukarno. East Bengalis viewed

Mujib as a symbol of everything their beloved Bangladesh stood for in 1971. He was the leader who promised them democracy, freedom and, most importantly, equal opportunities and human dignity. It was ironic, however, that less than a year after he became Prime Minister, he became a symbol of autocracy, inefficiency and tyranny. The war-ravaged country was in very bad shape when he returned to independent Bangladesh from a Pakistani prison in January 1972. Rebuilding the country was a Herculean task for him. For the majority of the population, even survival and sustenance were very difficult. In 1972–1975, the country was at the mercy of foreign aid agencies and donors, observes Gowher Rizvi.¹

In his assessment, Sheikh Mujib was an administrator of a country in trouble, even if without these problems, but given his track record as an administrator and his fast declining popularity in 1972, it is difficult to fully agree with his analysis: “His [Mujib’s] selfless sacrifice in giving the Bengalis an identity had endeared him to the people and a deep bond united the leader with the people: a bond that remained unbroken up to his death, although he lacked any sophisticated knowledge of running a modern government.”² Rizvi is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, he thinks Mujib “displayed a rare political acumen” by convincing his colleagues to amend the Constitution to introduce a presidential form of government in the country; and on the other, he is critical of Mujib’s role as the new dictator: “For his [Mujib’s] own part he was content to centralize all powers in his hands and attempted to rule the country like a medieval despot Even Mujib had not been killed, chances of his reforms being implemented were remote.” Rizvi is also critical of Mujib’s glorifying his autocratic rule as the “Second Revolution,” which he believes was a departure from “Free-Style Democracy!”³

The Liberation came with an undemocratic, unaccountable and patriarchal administrative system. Even the Constituent Assembly was not free from controversies. Despite being elected as members of Pakistan’s National Assembly (MNA) in 1970 to frame a constitution for Pakistan, the 160 members of the new legislature were not tasked with legislating laws for Bangladesh. Surprisingly, members of the Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan (MPAs) had no mandate to formulate any constitution for any country but sat in the assembly and participated in the formulation of the Constitution of Bangladesh.

Mujib had hardly any understanding of international politics either. As Henry Kissinger called him an “inordinate fool,” so did renowned Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, who interviewed him in less than three weeks after his return from Pakistan. She found Mujib extremely disrespectful of her—he kept her waiting for four hours for the scheduled interview—and considered him a liar, rude, ignorant, unprofessional as a leader and a dangerous person. Mujib was very furious at Fallaci, abruptly stopped the interview and was very intimidating after she had asked him for his reaction on the brutal public killing of four “Bihari” or non-Bengali “Pakistani collaborators” by freedom fighter Kader Siddiqi at Dhaka Stadium on 18 December 1971, two days after the Liberation. She literally ran away from the Prime Minister’s office, and soon out of Bangladesh. Mujib is said to have sent hooligans to harass her after she walked out of an unpleasant interview with him.⁴

While some defend him for his helplessness regarding Bangladesh’s pathetic condition under his rule, others identify him as the problem. Mujib lacked both the ability to understand the problem of governance and the integrity to act upon it. During his interview with ABC’s Peter Jennings and Howard Tucker soon after independence, he said his country could become prosperous as it was resourceful; and that his people loved him deeply. According to Howard Tucker’s feedback, the love of the people for Mujib, and his charisma were not enough to save Bangladesh from its deep plight. Tucker thought Mujib’s optimism could be disappointing at the end of the process.⁵ Mujib did not elaborate on his government’s plans for rebuilding during another BBC interview with David Frost. He told all the interviewers how Pakistani occupation troops had brutalized his people, and how much he loved and adored his own people. Mujib was all about himself, in the first-person singular number, who is said to have dreamt of Bangladesh in 1948.⁶ However, despite all his dreams about building his golden Bangladesh, his cherished homeland following the war “was marked by increasing corruption and incompetence in [Mujib] government.”⁷

Mujib is both a hero and a villain in Bangladesh. He lost his charisma and popularity in less than a year after the Liberation, so much so that many Bangladeshis celebrated his brutal assassination. Thus, we must take every statement he or others make about him with a grain of salt. His tendency to over-glorify himself as the sole leader of the Liberation War, even with untrue assertions, is another difficulty in unravelling the truth about himself

and his role in the Liberation of Bangladesh.⁸ On television on 21 February 1972, he gave a self-glorifying statement about his so-called role in the Language Movement in 1952. The assertion he made was untrue. It goes like this: In February 1952, while he was being treated at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, he allegedly handed out directions to several student leaders organizing protests in the adjacent Arts Building of Dhaka University, with pieces of a paper he had dropped through the window of the hospital toilet. The most renowned historian of the Language Movement, Badruddin Umar, reveals that the story of Mujib being in Dhaka Central Jail in February 1952 was not true because in that month he was imprisoned in the District Jail at Faridpur.⁹

Nevertheless, nobody can deny his contribution to the independence of Bangladesh, whether he intended it or not. Success stories abound in his career. The following are some of his contributions: (a) he inspired thousands of Bengalis to become freedom fighters to free Bangladesh; (b) he asked India to withdraw its troops from Bangladesh, which had defeated Pakistani forces, and it did so; (c) he deserves credit for putting forth the first Constitution of Bangladesh within a year of independence; and (d) his administration secured diplomatic recognition for Bangladesh from countries, including the US, which had opposed it. The laundry list of his failures is quite long. In addition to failing to control his family members, cronies, beneficiaries and party members, he publicly admitted that he was helpless because he was surrounded by the *Chatar Dal* or gangs of thieves and sycophants. However, the way Mujib defended his corrupt party workers also revealed his unwillingness to take legal action against them. Officials of the Awami League distributed relief materials only to those who could pay them bribes during the 1974 famine. According to reports, Mujib had requested that Monwarul Islam, a bureaucrat working in his office, investigate such reports. Although there was over a million dead during the famine, Mujib admitted only 27,000 deaths and blamed them on “natural disaster” rather than his incompetent domestic and foreign policies. Upon hearing from Monwarul Islam that Mujib’s workers had committed wrongdoing, Mujib said: “Listen when I started my party, I could not get brilliant students like you to come to join my party And I had with me only *ma tarano, baap khedano chheley* (homeless urchins). Isn’t it natural that they should engage in such activities once they are in power?” Mujib implied it had to be tolerated.¹⁰

Using police and paramilitary troops, he ruthlessly sought out enemies of his rule, which became a one-party dictatorship by early 1975 under the Bangladesh Peasants' and Workers' Party (BAKSAL), the Soviet Communist Party's prototype. Military and police officers, bureaucrats, journalists and even university teachers were coerced into joining the party, but only four compliant newspapers remained in circulation, and civil liberty and the right to protest against the Regime vanished by January 1975. In August 1975, the present writer, a Dhaka University teacher, was (sort of) forced to join the BAKSAL. The Mujib government, after its police and Rakkhi Bahini started brutalizing people, though selectively, rapidly became a regime, with all its negative connotations. Leaders and activists from the "leftist" National Socialist Party (JSD) and Siraj Sikdar's ultra-leftist Sarbahara Party have been the main victims of extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrests. The one-party BAKSAL regime was not only illegitimate but also riddled with paradoxes. Interesting enough, although according to the hastily drafted BAKSAL legislation, the President of the Republic would be elected by the people, he was never elected as the "lifelong" President of Bangladesh, as specified in the 25 January 1975 Constitutional Amendment.

As mentioned above, after his release from a Pakistani prison in January 1972, Mujib claimed that the Pakistani Occupation Army had killed three million people in Bangladesh during the Liberation War. As Sarmila Bose has refuted Mujib's mythical figure of "three million dead" in her well-researched book, so too has freedom fighter Colonel (retd.) Nuruzzaman. The latter views the three-million figure as absurd, asserting that if the three-million figure is to be believed then there were 11,111 deaths per day during the nine months of the Liberation War, but nobody saw such a scale of atrocities in Bangladesh.¹¹ Sarmila Bose rightly observes that the memorial plaque in front of the Arts Building at Dhaka University displays only 149 names of Bengalis killed by Pakistani soldiers, making the claim of three million martyrs unsubstantiated. We know Dhaka University was the centre of Bengali militancy against Pakistani rule. Bose also cites William Drummond's *Guardian* article of 6 June 1972, where he writes, "the three million death figure is an exaggeration so gross as to be absurd." Bose's painstaking attention to details in her book also gives some plausible figures of total dead in Bangladesh during the Liberation War. She thinks tens of thousands of non-Bengalis ("Biharis") perished in 1971. And, the

total number of dead—Bengali and non-Bengali, civilian and military—was between 50,000 and 100,000.¹² British journalist Peter Gill writes in 1973: “Sheikh Mujib’s wild figure of three million Bengalis killed during those 10 terrible months is at least 20 times too high, if not 50 or 60.”¹³

To address the problem of Bangladesh being a basket case, especially during the Mujib era, one can defend the “founding father” in his self-defence, although it is unconvincing, that he had inherited a war-ravaged country, mainly due to the massive plundering and destruction of Bangladesh by the Pakistani occupation forces. Bangladesh was ungoverned and poor during the Mujib era for other reasons, beyond what was generally attributed to the wrongdoings of the Pakistani Occupation Army. It is noteworthy that Bangladesh was the highest recipient of foreign aid during the Mujib era. It received \$2.5 billion worth of foreign aid, which was more than what East Pakistan received during the Pakistan period, 1947–1971. The mess Bangladesh experienced soon after the Liberation was mostly due to Mujib’s lack of administrative skills and understanding of international politics. Caf Dowlah has aptly divided Mujib’s political career into the pre-and Post-Liberation phases. In the first phase, he “used his unique reservoir of charisma and organizational skills adroitly,” but in the Post-Liberation phase, he argues, his “*grandiose charisma and indisputable command over his people gradually faded out as his regime suffered from far-reaching ideological vacillations and palpable political fraudulence*” (emphasis added).¹⁴

We need to re-examine the history of Post-Liberation Bangladesh with a critical examination of people, events and ideas. We may highlight some significant events and socio-economic and political developments since the Liberation on 16 December 1971 to help understand the problem being discussed in this chapter. This writer recalls a fiery speech over Radio Bangladesh by pro-Mujib student leader A.S.M. Abdur Rab, days after the Liberation asking Bengalis to physically eliminate all collaborators of the Pakistani Occupation Army. The speech is relevant to the understanding of how Bangladesh became a state that justified state terrorism. Rab, who first publicly raised the national flag of Bangladesh on 2 March 1971 at Dhaka University campus—and who later became the General Secretary of the “leftist” JSD in 1972—mentioned some prominent Bengali Muslim leaders, who had been dead against the creation of Bangladesh, and told his followers: “You know what to do with them!” Rab and other pro-Mujib

student leaders lived in Zahurul Haque Hall (a dormitory of Dhaka University) around the time prominent pro-Pakistani national leader Maulvi Farid Ahmad was tortured and lynched. This was a widely circulated story of the extra-judicial killing of a Pakistani collaborator across Bangladesh, one among hundreds, during 1972–1973. This writer witnessed scores of so-called collaborators of the Pakistan Army being taken blindfolded and gunned down by members of the Mukti Bahini (Bengali freedom fighters) throughout the first two months of the Liberation in different parts of Dhaka city. Days after the Liberation, this writer also witnessed Mukti Bahini's brutal killing of Pakistani football player Musa—who used to play for a sporting club in Dhaka—near the Haradeo Glass Factory in Old Dhaka. They shot him and left his body floating in a nearby pond.

This writer was at the Dhaka Stadium on 18 December 1971 when a famous freedom fighter Kader Siddiqi (a prominent politician today) bayoneted to death four Bihari (Urdu-speaking) “collaborators” in broad daylight, in front of thousands of cheering crowds, scores of foreign journalists and photographers. Western media gave wide coverage to the gruesome killing of so-called Pakistani collaborators by Kader Siddiqi and his men.¹⁵ Several Western media outlets also published the video of this extra-judicial killing, which is still available on YouTube. This is how American journalist Lawrence Lifschultz records the incident: “Kader Siddiqi appalled both Bengalis and foreigners when, in public, shortly after the liberation of Dacca, he personally bayoneted four ‘Bihari’ (non-Bengali) alleged collaborators to death. The entire incident was filmed from start to finish by foreign film crews whom he had invited to the spectacle.”¹⁶ Instead of taking any action against Siddiqi, Mujib publicly lauded his action: “Had you killed not four but 400, still I would not have taken any action against you.”¹⁷ The extra-judicial killing of so-called Pakistani collaborators by Bengalis—in vengeance and to settle old scores—continued throughout Bangladesh well beyond 31 January 1972, when thousands of *Mukti Bahini* members (Freedom Fighters) surrendered their arms to Sheikh Mujib at a public ceremony in Dhaka.¹⁸

Vacillations, Ambiguities and Incompetence

Mujib's political vacillations, ambiguities and incompetence as an administrator, further compounded by his arrogance and wrong policies by

his sycophantic ministers, bureaucrats, close relatives and his party leaders. There was hardly any coherent domestic or foreign policy during his rule. Soon after becoming the Prime Minister in early 1972, he abruptly introduced the four-pronged state policy of Nationalism–Democracy–Socialism–Secularism, touted as *Mujibbad* (Mujibism) by his cronies and ignorant admirers. In the name of socialism, his government nationalized all industries and financial institutions owned by Bengalis and non-Bengalis and manned them by inexperienced and corrupt bureaucrats and ruling-party supporters. Meanwhile, before his return from Pakistani custody to Bangladesh, the Bangladesh government under Tajuddin Ahmed had taken major decisions about taking over “Bihari” or non-Bengali properties (industrial, commercial and residential) for their alleged collaboration with the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971. Instead of reversing the hastily taken decision by the Tajuddin government, Mujib started committing one serious mistake after another with regard to running a war-ravaged country.

One of the first laws was about the status of properties left behind by Pakistanis and non-Bengalis (many of whom were still in Bangladesh). On 3 January 1972 the Acting President’s Order No. 1 allowed the government to take control and management of the “abandoned” industrial and commercial concerns. Mujib appointed his friend Ghazi Gholam Mustafa a ruling-party MP from Dhaka as the Chairman of the Central Board of managing the “abandoned properties” in the country. In every ‘abandoned’ mills and factories “either party workers or junior employees having no experience or technical know-how were employed as managers.” According to Moudud Ahmed: “The law did not only make the government the owners of properties but gave more powers and authority than the original owners had.” Interestingly, although the court ruling was that “if any member of the family was present, the property could not be treated as abandoned property,” the damage had already been done as many owners “could not come before the court due to fear of those who were enjoying the properties under the Awami League patronage or due to financial and security reasons.” As Moudud Ahmed illustrates: “The Jute Mills, Textile Mills and hundreds of other large industries that were managed by West Pakistani businessmen or their experienced trusted Managers now fell into the hands of some unknown incompetents. The result was chaos, corruption, loot and plunder. The machinery and raw materials were sent out of the country through organized smuggling, production plummeted, properties were sold

or exchanged at any price of convenience Soon most of the industries and other units either went into the red or closed down or sold out. It was perhaps a singular field where patriotism did not touch the soul of any person whether he was a Minister or a freedom fighter or a government employee or a member of the 16th Division [pseudo-freedom fighters who emerged on 16th December 1971, on the Liberation Day]—not to speak of their relatives, supporters and protégées.”¹⁹

The second major step of the government was in accordance with the ruling Awami League party’s “commitment to establish a socialist economic order,” which most leaders, including Mujib, neither understood nor had any commitment to. This bold and unwise step of the government on 25 March 1972 about nationalizing all banks and insurance companies and big industries with fixed assets valued at Tk 1.5 million. The outcome was simply disastrous to the economy of Bangladesh. While the nationalized industries and financial institutions became sick, they became the lucrative means to become super-rich for pro-government managers, administrators and workers. Mujib unceremoniously removed Justice B.A. Siddiky as the Chairman of the Bangladesh Red Cross and appointed Ghazi Gholam Mustafa as the new Chairman of Bangladesh Red Cross. Soon the latter became infamous as one of the most corrupt beneficiaries of the Mujib regime, and was widely known as *Kambal-Chore* (the blanket-thief), alleged to have sold off millions of blankets which Western donors had sent for Bangladeshi poor. Mujib’s politics of patronage was at the core of the problem of corruption and mismanagement of the economy. “Moreover his [Mujib’s] lack of administrative experience was not balanced by deep intellectual convictions or knowledge about the problems of the new and problem-ridden states of Asia and Africa. In deciding policy matters, he was guided more by his political instincts than anything else.”²⁰ Mujib believed that “party loyalty should supersede administrative neutrality and the administration should be carried on in such a manner as to strengthen the influence of AL workers”; according to Abul Mansur Ahmed, a senior Awami League [AL] leader and a central minister of Pakistan (1956–1957), Mujib’s political philosophy was that “the party system could not develop without a network of patronage.”²¹ Once installed to power, Mujib started doling out state patronage to his cronies and party people, right and left. First, he appointed his own people as administrators of nationalized industries, factories, corporations, banks, insurance companies. Second, the

distribution of locally produced and imported goods was carried out by licensed” dealers,” “most of whom were AL workers and sympathisers rather than professional traders.” In addition, AL leaders and workers grabbed around 60,000 houses abandoned by “non-Bengalis”—Urdu-, Gujarati-, Punjabi-, Pashtu- or Sindhi-speaking traders and industrialists in the country—in Dhaka and elsewhere. Lastly, AL leaders and supporters were engaged in large-scale smuggling of rice, jute and relief goods to India, with impunity. Besides Ghazi Gholam Mustafa, “Sheikh Abu Nasser, Mujib’s only brother, was one of the ring leaders of jute smuggling operations to India.” Mujib’s nephews and eldest son Kamal are said to have resorted to massive corruption as well.²² While Mujib’s ambitious and powerful nephew Sheikh Moni occupied the property of the Urdu daily *Pasban* in Dhaka and converted it into the office and press of his Bengali daily *Banglar Bani*, some young pro-Awami student leaders occupied the property of the Janata Printing and Packages at Rankin Street in Dhaka and started publishing a Bengali daily, *Janakantha*, from there.²³ Interestingly, Sheikh Moni, who had been a journalist at a paltry salary of Rs. 275 a month, became wealthy and, most importantly, a very powerful entity in the ruling party in no time, after the Liberation. He had a tremendous influence on Mujib. One day, he is said to have asked Mujib to remove some government officials, and the latter simply asked him to hand him in the list of people to be removed. Soon several high officials lost their jobs and were not even given the opportunity to defend themselves. While Moni was the Chief of the Awami youth front (Juba League), another nephew of Mujib’s Sheikh Shahidul Islam became the chief of the Awami student front (Chhatro League), holding the rank of a minister. Mujib’s own brother-in-law Syed Hussain, who was a junior government official (Section Officer) in 1971, overnight became an Additional Secretary (the second-highest rank in civil bureaucracy) in 1972. Mujib’s only brother Sheikh Naser also became a very rich businessman, although he (like Mujib) came from a lower-middle-class family. Mujib’s eldest son Kamal was a partner of several business firms. He was also very influential in the government and was notorious for his brash behaviour and abusive language. Several eyewitness accounts reveal his public assault on a football referee Nani Basak for conceding a foul against Kamal’s football team, Abahoni.²⁴ This writer is an eyewitness to Mujib’s sons’ and nephews’ rude behaviour in public, and threatening people by brandishing handguns, by nephew Moni

and younger son Jamal, who was hardly eighteen in 1973. Jamal passed out as a military officer from Sandhurst (British military academy). And, his graduation cost the Bangladesh exchequer 6000-pound sterling, which was a substantial amount in Bangladesh in the 1970s.²⁵

As narrated by Shariful Haque Dalim—one of the 1975 August coupmakers, popularly known as “Major Dalim”—on his telling Mujib one day that he was fast losing popularity for conceding too many privileges to his party people, Mujib is said to have told him: “Didn’t my party people suffer at the hands of Pakistanis? If they get some benefits today what’s the harm?”²⁶ Thus, Mujib’s role in Post-Liberation Bangladesh “remains highly controversial and continues to impact his legacy Even after more than four decades of his brutal death,” observes Caf Dowlah.²⁷ The popular perception of Mujib among Bangladeshis during his regime was that he was primarily a benefactor of his own people, not of the nation at large! Dalim cites several examples of Mujib’s blatant nepotism. Dalim is also critical of Mujib’s decision to grant two-year seniority to “freedom fighters” in the civil administration and military, which he believes “initiated a divide-and-rule policy” across Bangladesh.²⁸ Mujib also formalized cronyism even by destroying the cadre of civil service, hitherto only open to the very bright graduates. In 1973, Mujib’s powerful political secretary Tofael Ahmed became the dispenser of top civil service positions to cronies, relatives and friends of Awami League leaders. The upshot being the selection of under-qualified party loyalists—who were even exempted from going through the rigour of any written test—the civil service cadre (which included administrative, foreign and police services) remained infected with under-qualified people for thirty-odd years. Interestingly, quite a large number of the “Tofael-Service” (as called across the board) recruits came from Mujib’s and Tofael’s home districts, Gopalganj and Bhola. Young aspirants for the lucrative cadre service, including this writer (who did not have the right connections) had to look for job opportunities, elsewhere. No wonder, Mujib died unlamented. Barring a handful of close relatives and beneficiaries, nobody mourned his death publicly. Only those who were too young to remember Mujib or were born after his death, mourn his brutal assassination, then again, under the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government sponsorship.

The Mujib government also established Relief Committees to help the destitute in the war-ravaged country. Moudud Ahmed has rightly pointed

out that not only the powers and functions of the relief committees were “vague and undefined” but they also had no legal backing, and were dominated by Awami League members at all levels. So much so that the committees were merely extensions of the ruling party. Bangladesh received more than a billion US dollars in aid grants (a substantially big amount for 1972) for relief and rehabilitation of the poor and uprooted people, but people in charge of disbursing relief goods were ruthlessly corrupt at every level of operation. The state of state-sponsored plunder and mismanagement of industries, financial institutions and businesses reflected the hidden agenda of the ruling Awami League party leaders and workers who had suffered a lot during the Pakistan period. “Now they behaved in such a manner as if it was their turn to compensate themselves and enjoy their life,” observes Moudud Ahmed.²⁹ One wonders, why soon after the Liberation there was a substantial decline in the GDP growth of Bangladesh during the Mujib era in comparison to 1969–1970 fiscal! There was also a substantial decline in the agricultural and industrial output as well, including rice, jute, tea, and a sharp rise in the inflation rate, 48 per cent in 1972–1973, and 51 per cent in 1974–1975. Compared with 1969–1970, the agricultural price index of the country rose to 447, food price index to 543 and the industrial price index to 573, or 400–500 per cent increases in price indexes in just four years.³⁰

Soon after the Liberation, the Bangladesh government declared Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore’s patriotic song, “*Amar Sonar Bangla*” (My Golden Bengal) as the national anthem of Bangladesh. Paradoxically, Tagore wrote this song in 1905 protesting the British colonial administration’s Partition of Bengal, which had carved out the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam with Dhaka as its capital, from the province of Bengal. This decision was antithetical to the reality of Bangladesh, which till 26 March 1971 had been the eastern wing of Pakistan, carved out of the province of Bengal during the Partition in 1947. One wonders, as to how a part of united Bengal, which is an independent entity as Bangladesh, could adopt “*Amar Sonar Bangla*”—which was all about the reunification of eastern and western Bengal (as it existed during 1905–1911)—as the national anthem of the country unless Bangladeshis at large want a merger with the Indian state of Paschim Banga or West Bengal! The decision by the Bangladesh government and people at large smacks of their collective inconsistencies, identity crisis, ignorance and insensitivity to the historical

reality, and its dire implications. Last but not least, Mujib government's hasty decision to adopt the controversial Tagore song as the national anthem has remained a bone of contention between those who are ardently in its favour and those who vociferously oppose it as "unpatriotic" and as a ploy to a merger between Bangladesh and India. Since the polity of Bangladesh is sharply polarized between pro-and anti-Indian people, the national anthem has been a divisive rather than a unifying factor for Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, there were too many arms in the hands of genuine and fake freedom fighters, which posed a serious threat to law and order. Although Mujib succeeded in getting thousands of arms formally surrendered by freedom fighters by late January and early February 1972, the majority of arms remained with freedom fighters and others. Out of total desperation, and with "no philosophical concept or approach in engaging the freedom fighters for national reconstruction," by February 1972, Mujib banned several militias, including the *Mukti Fauj* and *Mujib Bahini*. However, armed robbery, hijacking, extortion by armed criminals, kidnapping of women and even attacks on police stations and outposts turned the country into one of the most violent and unsafe in the world throughout the Mujib era, 1972 and 1975. Mujib's failure or unwillingness to force his partymen to surrender arms was an impediment towards improving the law-and-order situation.³¹ On 7 March 1972, through the *Rakkhi Bahini* Order (Order No. 21) the government created a paramilitary force called the *Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini* (JRB) or National Guard Force. Mujib raised this paramilitary force with the help of the Indian Army.³² Mujib's "military nightmare" was behind the creation of this Indian-backed "parallel army" in Bangladesh.³³ By 1975 the JRB's strength rose to 25,000 men, and the Mujib Regime planned to increase it to 130,000 by 1980, bringing a "regiment" [battalion] each under the disposal of the district governors, created under BAKSAL. The core of the JRB came from the erstwhile *Mujib Bahini* or the Bengal Liberation Front (BLF)—led by Mujib's nephew Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni—freedom fighters with absolute loyalty to the Awami League, specially trained by the Indian Army.³⁴ Dalim is possibly right that a) the BAKSAL ideology was "inherent" in the idea of having a specially armed and trained militia under Indian Army supervision, which would be only loyal to the command of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; and b) the JRB could arrest anybody without any warrants and could kill people with total impunity.³⁵ So much so, that even Mujib's loyal Army Chief General

Shafiullah (who later became a minister in Hasina's cabinet) admitted in 1987 that the JRB had been created to replace the Army.³⁶ While the Supreme Court in a judgement stated, "The Jatio Rakkhi Bahini is functioning without any rules of procedure or code of conduct," Mujib's 4th Amendment on 25 January 1975 ensured: "The Chief Justice and other judges shall be appointed by the President," and "A Judge may be removed ... by order of the President."³⁷ Interestingly, since the JRB troops and officers wore bottle green uniforms—strikingly similar to the Indian Army uniform—it evoked a lot of controversy and conspiracy theories across Bangladesh. Ironically, while the JRB was created to restore law and order, soon after its inception it became a death-squad with total impunity.³⁸ In other words, Mujib established an autocracy that could terminate any government servant and judge without any prior notice, and the terminated employees had no right to appeal the decisions either.³⁹ Anti-Mujib people, whose number was growing at geometric progression within months of the Liberation, took no time to further tarnish Mujib's image as a turncoat and Indian agent. The JRB's resorting to extra-judicial killing, arbitrary arrests and torture of people under illegal detention soon alienated it from the bulk of the population. According to the weekly *Holiday* editor Enayetullah Khan, the JRB was an instrument of counter-revolution on which the Bangladesh government had no control. "It is an extension of the CRP [Central Reserve Police of India] to safeguard an obliging government of the Indian ruling class and the expansionist interests of Indian sub-imperialism."⁴⁰ If JSD (a neo-leftist offshoot of the AL, albeit hostile to the Mujib Regime) leaders are to be believed, Mujib's law-enforcers killed around 60,000 JSD supporters and activists and arrested around another 86,000 during 1972–1975.⁴¹ One may, however, agree with the view that "the universal bad name the *Rakkhi Bahini* had earned during the Mujib regime can hardly be erased from the collective memory of the nation."⁴² Caf Dowlah has rightly agreed with Zillur Rahman Khan that the Indian "equipped and trained" *Rakkhi Bahini* did not bode well for Mujib, and that his bloody overthrow may be attributed to his "policy to neutralize the Army's political power' through the establishment of the paramilitary force."⁴³ While Anthony Mascarenhas believes that 30,000 opposition supporters got killed at the hands of Mujib's law-enforcers; and that according to Mujib, by the end of 1974 almost 4000 Awami League party

workers, including five MPs, had also been killed by opposition groups. Moudud Ahmed is, however, sceptical about the casualty figure of 30,000 in the opposition camp.⁴⁴ Interestingly, soon after Mujib had publicly asked the law-enforcers: *Naxal dekha matro guli korba* (Shoot Naxalites or ultra-leftist activists at sight) in a public rally, which got wide circulation in media, there was a further drop in his waning popularity. This writer recalls Maulana Bhashani's speech, delivered at a Dhaka rally soon after Mujib had asked the police to shoot Naxalites at sight: "How would your police recognise 'Naxalites' as their identity as 'Naxalite' is never written on their attire or body"? Late Enayetullah Khan, the editor of the weekly *Holiday*, wrote this in this regard:

"When the Prime Minister orders the police to shoot at sight 'Naxalites' and that too in a mammoth public meeting, no higher legal sanction is required to endorse political killing at the state level By ordering the police to shoot 'Naxalites' and threatening every blessed soul outside the orbit of the Awami League, ... the government will only expose the real face of Fascism which seems to be lurking behind the façade of the ruling party."⁴⁵

However, as discussed earlier, historically there has hardly been any reliable statistics on positive or negative results of government policies, agricultural or industrial output, per capita income of the people, the GDP growth rate, birth and death rates in Bangladesh, one may never know the exact number of people killed in the Liberation War, or at the hands of political activists and law-enforcers, during the Mujib era and afterwards. Nevertheless, political killings did take place and people got killed by law-enforcers, and political activists. Renowned Indian cultural historian Sumanta Banerjee tends to agree with an inventory prepared by the Bengali daily *Ittefaq* in 1982 on the number of Bangladeshi victims of political killing during 1972–1982. The figures are as follows: The Awami League party lost around 4500 supporters at the hands of leftist opposition activists during 1972–1982; the JSD lost around 6000, and the *Sarbahara* and *Samyabadi* parties lost around 10,000 followers at the hands of Mujib's law-enforcers during 1972–1975, alone. The inventory also reveals, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* and Muslim League—who collaborated with Pakistan during 1971—lost around 8000 supporters during 1971–1972.⁴⁶

His government failed to prepare a list of genuine freedom fighters and collaborators. Thus, many favourites were classified as freedom fighters and many anti-Awami leaguers fell on the wrong side of the fence, got stigmatized as Pakistani collaborators, or even worse, as war criminals. While a low-intensity insurgency by ill-equipped and ill-trained Bengali insurgents during the nine-month-long war was hardly a war of Liberation, active and inactive participants in the ineffective war were glorified as freedom fighters, and rewarded accordingly by the Mujib government (and its successors). Since blank “Freedom Fighter Certificates,” duly signed by General MAG Osmani, the Supreme Commander of the freedom fighters during the Liberation War, were openly sold on footpaths in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country (the present writer is an eye-witness to this happening in broad daylight in Dhaka in 1972), the number of “freedom fighters” swelled to a record high. While the maximum total of active freedom fighters was around 50,000 people, 1.2–2 million Freedom Fighter Certificates were in circulation in Post-Liberation Bangladesh, and “eleven out of twelve freedom fighters” were fake.⁴⁷ The abnormal inflation in the number of “freedom fighters” may be imputed to the preferential treatment of freedom fighters in government service, as all incumbent government servants having a piece of paper certifying them as freedom fighters got financial benefits and two-year seniority and were preferred to non-freedom fighters in the job market in the public sector. Conversely, those who continued working as bureaucrats, administrators and teachers and performed as singers, actors and musicians in government-run radio and television stations during the nine months of the Pakistani occupation period in Bangladesh in 1971, soon after the Liberation went through a very adverse situation. This writer knew many “Bihari” teachers and railway employees who lost employment the day after the Liberation, only because of their “ethnicity.”

Mujib government’s other major act was the promulgation of the Bangladesh Collaborators (Special Tribunals) Order 1972, on 24 January 1972. The main objective of the law was to try people who directly or indirectly had collaborated with the Pakistani occupation forces during the Liberation War, especially those who had killed, raped, tortured, and expropriated Bengalis in collaboration with Pakistanis. Tens of thousands of Bengali collaborators or alleged collaborators got arrested and a handful of them was tried as quislings of the Pakistani occupation forces during the

war. Interestingly, during the Mujib era, the Special Tribunal found a Bengali collaborator Chikon Ali from Kushtia—who was a Razakar, a member of a paramilitary force raised by the Pakistani occupation forces in Bangladesh—guilty, and was sentenced to death on 10 June 1972, which was the first-ever verdict of capital punishment under the law. Later the Supreme Court gave him life imprisonment. Only 752 collaborators were punished by the Tribunals.⁴⁸ Many jurists, politicians, intellectuals and human rights activists at home and abroad were critical of setting up a tribunal to punish collaborators. Among others, politicians like Maulana Bhashani, Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish, Abul Mansur Ahmed, Aatur Rahman Khan, Justice S.M. Murshid, Alim Al- Razi and Enayetullah Khan criticized the Collaborators Act because of its abuse by the ruling party. A former Awami League leader Aatur Rahman Khan contended: “Instead of going for national reconstruction, the government considered to take action against collaborators and imaginary enemies all over the country as its first and foremost duty.” He pleaded for amnesty for all collaborators who had not committed crimes like murder, arson, rape or looting during the Liberation War. He urged the government to bring national reconciliation and alleged many hard-core collaborators were serving the government, while many “genuine patriots and supporters of the freedom struggle” who had to collaborate with Pakistanis to save skin in 1971 were under detention or absconding. He blamed the Mujib government for harassing their political rivals as Pakistani collaborators. He also alleged that the trial under the Collaborators Order was a sham.⁴⁹

The situation became unbearable for those who had not crossed the border into India to become “freedom fighters” by default or design—unlike (almost) ten million Bengalis who had—and, even worse, had worked for the Pakistani government during 26 March to 16 December 1971, as they became prime suspects as Pakistani collaborators or Razakars (a generic term, derived from the pro-Pakistani Razakar militia). So much so that from the day after the Liberation on 16 December, many renowned Bengali radio and TV artists who had worked in occupied Bangladesh lost their jobs. This irked renowned Bangladeshi journalist and editor Enayetullah Khan so much that in early 1972, he wrote a sarcastic editorial, “Sixty-Five Million Collaborators?” in his weekly *Holiday* in protest against this, as if only the ten million who went to India out of the seventy-five million people during the Liberation War were freedom fighters and the

rest sixty-five million who did not/could not do so, were all collaborators!⁵⁰ Some pro-Pakistani university teachers, including several vice-chancellors, lost jobs and also served jail terms for alleged collaboration with the Pakistani occupation forces. One may mention Syed Sajjad Hussain, who had been the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University during the Pakistani occupation period, who was brutally beaten up by over-zealous “patriotic” Bengalis, and was put behind bars for two years until his release in May 1973.⁵¹ The Mujib regime’s ruthless and unceremonious termination of jobs, and even confiscation of properties and denying Bangladeshi citizenship to native Bangladeshis by birth only because of their purported or actual support for Pakistan during the Liberation War—which was also a civil war between pro- and anti-Bangladesh people—later led to his brutal overthrow and the perpetual cleavage that his policy created between pro- and anti-Liberation Bengalis, which as of late 2019, kept the polity fractured. Among hundreds of victims of the Mujib regime’s persecuted “anti-Bangladesh” Bengalis, one may mention Professors GW Chowdhury, Sajjad Hussain, Abdul Bari, M Rashiduzzaman, Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, and Hamidul Haque Chowdhury (owner of the daily *Pakistan Observer*). The government confiscated Hamidul Haque Chowdhury’s properties, including Bengali and English newspapers he owned. Sajjad Hussain, Abdul Bari and Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal lost their jobs and spent time behind bars. One may have some idea about the vindictive nature of the hasty process of dismissal of jobs and even the denial of Bangladeshi citizenship to “pro-Pakistani” Bengali intellectuals. One Dhaka University professor, Rashiduzzaman, lost not only his job but also his citizenship soon after the Liberation, for his alleged collaboration with the Pakistani Occupation Army. Interestingly, he was not even in Bangladesh during the Liberation War. He had been a visiting professor at Columbia University while Bangladesh was still East Pakistan in late 1970 and during the Liberation War. According to the Professor, some of his colleagues at Dhaka University, who had been instrumental in the termination of his job and loss of Bangladesh citizenship had done so out of personal vendetta and professional jealousy. Meanwhile, the tribunals resolved 2884 cases out of the total 37,471 (some 50,000 “collaborators were arrested) against “collaborators,” and only 752 of them were found guilty of collaboration. The courts acquitted more than 2000 accused tried for collaboration.⁵² What is even more surprising is that while Professors Sajjad Hussain of

Dhaka University and Abdul Bari of Rajshahi University were arrested—the former was brutalized and left for dead by Awami League activists—soon after the Liberation for becoming vice-chancellors of Dhaka and Rajshahi University, respectively, under the Pakistani administration during the Liberation War in 1971, scores of prominent civil servants, police officers and a few army officers who had loyally served the Pakistani occupation forces in Bangladesh during 1971, continued to serve the Mujib administration.⁵³

It is noteworthy, the Constitution of Bangladesh enacted under the supervision of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman did not safeguard the fundamental rights of the people and the independence of the judiciary. The parliament through a simple majority could “amend any provision of the Constitution,” and thus provided more power to the ruling party. “In other words,” as Moudud Ahmed points out, “the executive office through the party in power could now bring any amendment to suit their administration.” The Constitution, as amended in 1973, took away the fundamental rights of the citizens of Bangladesh.⁵⁴ On 22 September 1973, the ruling party inserted clauses in the Constitution which provided “Preventive Detention” and “Proclamation of the State of Emergency” by the President of the Republic. In other words, the first clause authorized the government to detain anybody for at least six months in order to prevent that person from “endangering public safety and the sovereignty of the state.” And, if the President was satisfied that a grave emergency existed in the country in which the security and economic life of the people were in danger, he might declare the State of Emergency. As per the Presidential Ordinance of 1973, fundamental rights of the citizens could be suspended, and the freedom of expression and the press and publications could be restricted as well.⁵⁵ On 5 January 1974, the parliament enacted the Special Power Act which empowered the police to arrest anybody on mere suspicion of one’s being engaged in “anti-state activities.”⁵⁶

While soon after the Liberation, the bulk of Bangladeshis were worried about bare survival due to abnormal price spiral of food and other necessities, and deteriorating law-and-order situation, Mujib on 1 December 1973 declared clemency for the bulk of detained “collaborators” effective 16 December on the second anniversary of the Liberation leading to the release of 36,400 alleged collaborators who had been detained for nearly two years without being charged with specific crimes of collaboration with

the Pakistani occupation forces. Mujib's clemency "signified a change in policy toward the war crimes trial,"⁵⁷ as people had been also reluctant to testify against alleged collaborators for various reasons. Against this backdrop, Mujib had to declare clemency to the vast majority of detained "collaborators." As a Canadian daily reported on 8 December 1973: "The government has abandoned the idea of trials. For nearly two years, the promise of trials has been a cornerstone of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's domestic policy," which also revealed that "Mujib was holding onto at least some of the alleged collaborators in order to muffle political opposition," and someone like influential Muslim League leader Abdus Sabur Khan was excluded from his clemency. Last but not least, Mujib had to agree not to try the 195 Pakistani war criminals (who were still in Indian POW camps) as he badly needed Pakistani and Chinese support for UN membership for Bangladesh.⁵⁸ Now, it is altogether a different question if Mujib really wanted the trial of Bengali "war criminals" still in detention or he was merely interested in keeping his potential political rivals incarcerated indefinitely! Interestingly, as it was evident afterwards, "collaborators" and "war criminals" like Ghulam Azam, Salahuddin Kader Chowdhury, Motiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid were not only acceptable to the average Bangladeshis but also very close to Sheikh Hasina and top Awami League leaders, who later tried them as "war criminals" and executed a few of them for their alleged crimes. Most of them came to the mainstream of politics got elected as MPs, and a couple of them became cabinet ministers. In hindsight, it appears that Mujib was instrumental in dividing the polity by pampering soldiers and bureaucrats who took part in the Liberation War and/or took sanctuary in India during the war. His ambiguity and lack of any consistent policy about the fate of the actual or alleged war criminals were divisive. However, as discussed above, thanks to the sharp polarization of the polity of Bangladesh, there are two diametrically opposite views on the nature of the amnesty declared by Mujib. While pro-Awami League people insist Mujib's amnesty excluded the war criminals, their opponents believe the clemency included every collaborator of the Pakistani occupation forces. It is noteworthy that Mujib's clemency, which was effective from 16 December 1973 onwards, on the second anniversary of the nation's Victory Day, granted amnesty to "all collaborators—convicted, detained, or jailed."⁵⁹ In sum, in view of the trial of so-called war criminals and their conviction under a controversial

and partisan Tribunal in 2013–2015, one may raise the question why after the mass release of several hundred collaborators by the Ziaur Rahman government in the late 1970s some people were charged with the crime for which they had already been acquitted by the government.

Interestingly, almost after half-a-century of Liberation, the polity of Bangladesh is still divided between “freedom fighters” and “non-freedom fighters.” The divide triggered to reserving special quota in public sector jobs for “freedom fighters,” their children and grandchildren. By early 2018 the country was sharply polarized between pro-and anti-Quota system. By then the government had promised 20 per cent of all public sector jobs (class I and class II) would be reserved for freedom fighters, their children and grandchildren, which it later “abolished,” leaving a lot of ambiguities about the whole controversy. By late 2018, those who in favour of preserving special quota for freedom fighter’s children and grandchildren demanded 30 per cent quota for them in class-I and class-II government jobs.⁶⁰ One can well imagine the absurdity of reserving 20 per cent or 30 per cent of government jobs exclusively for freedom fighters, their children and grandchildren, because the total number of actual freedom fighters being less than 100,000—including the military personnel and civilian volunteers⁶¹—out of seventy-five million people in the country in 1971, and around 170 million in 2019. And, one assumes, most children and grandchildren of freedom fighters were neither eligible nor interested in government jobs. One wonders if Mujib may ever be exonerated from sowing seeds of these malpractices by his and successive governments in the name of freedom fighters! His government’s decision to give two-year seniority to all government servants, including bureaucrats and military officers, who were freedom fighters or just barely crossed or managed to cross the border and stayed in India during the Pakistani occupation period—also became “freedom fighters” by default—at the end of the day polarized the country between “freedom fighters” and “non-freedom fighters.”

This divide between the two groups, one favoured/rewarded and another marginalized and discriminated against, especially among members of the armed forces who had been stranded in Pakistan and returned to Bangladesh in 1973, ultimately became the nemesis of the Mujib government. Although almost all the officers and soldiers who killed Mujib were freedom fighters, the bulk of repatriated officers and soldiers went against the Mujib regime

as they never gracefully accepted the overnight promotion of their juniors superseding them in ranks and benefits. Repatriated military officers' disenchantment with their supersedence by their juniors was reflected in their oft-repeated sarcasm, which the present writer came across in the 1970s, which was: "Majors have been 'generalised' in the Army!" This writer came across some Bangladesh Army officers, who got rapid promotions because of their participation in the Liberation War, publicly referred to their repatriated colleagues from Pakistan as "Pakis," in the most prejudicial manner. Since the Liberation of Bangladesh came through a revolutionary-cum-civil war, the country was most likely to remain fractured, ideologically. And, thanks to Mujib's inept handling of the situation, the polity of Bangladesh has remained sharply polarized between the adherents of various ideologies, secular, Islamic, socialist, capitalist, Bengali and Bangladeshi; and to make the situation further complicated and messy, each of these groups are subdivided into various sub-groups and factions. One may possibly impute this divide to the proverbial Bengali and peasant factionalism as well.

Within months of the Liberation, Mujib's ambivalence, incompetence and vengeance against his opponents—mainly leftists under Siraj Sikdar and the JSD—and the rapid deterioration of the law-and-order situation turned Bangladesh into a turbulent poverty-stricken country. By early 1973 there was a massive erosion of popular support for Mujib while his charisma had waned as well. According to Rounaq Jahan, the roots of the problem were in the mismanagement of factional politics by the Mujib regime, along with the mishandling of the economy. While the Liberation War had consequences such as disrupted communication, damaged and destroyed infrastructure and industries, unbridled corruption, inflation, black marketeering, hoarding and smuggling of food and consumer goods due to the collective corruption and inefficiency of the Mujib government, the period between mid-1973 and mid-1974 witnessed the imminent signs of the collapse of the regime. While despite high prices of food items and consumer goods in the early 1970s benefitted the small minority of people linked to the ruling party and the government, the hoi polloi was simply disillusioned with the "unequal share of austerity," which was contrary to the promises made by the Bangabandhu (the "Friend of Bengal" as Mujib is called by his admirers since early 1969).⁶² He promised to maintain strict austerity by members of his government, bureaucrats and everybody in

society in solidarity with the suffering masses. While he publicly asked people not to make ostentatious displays of wealth at weddings—he asked them to use garlands made of jasmine flower instead of gold jewellery for brides—there was a public display on print and electronic media of his two sons getting married with full pomp and grandeur, their brides wore gold jewellery and tiaras made of nine different types of expensive gemstones (*nauratan*). And, most importantly, this was one year prior to the introduction of his one-party dictatorship, while thousands of Bangladeshis were dying every day during the devastating famine of 1974.⁶³ Some contemporary media and analyst reports reveal a horrific place Bangladesh was turned into during the short tenure of Sheikh Mujib as the President and Prime Minister. From Rounaq Jahan we also get to know amidst widespread corruption, growing disenchantment of people, the number of armed attacks on police stations across Bangladesh was “alarmingly high” in 1973. While the regime’s support in the countryside was very low, it was “busy managing the factional conflicts in the ruling party and the administration,” reveals Rounaq Jahan. During the 1972–1973 fiscal, Bangladesh GDP was around 12–14 per cent lower than what it was in 1969–1970, and the industrial output was 30 per cent lower than the last fiscal year (1969–1970) before the Liberation War. She also reveals while the cost of living in Bangladesh rose substantially, there was a sharp decline in the revenue collection in 1973. Interestingly, she points out despite all these pressing issues, the main issue in the parliamentary elections in 1973 seemed to be “conspiracy,” as all the fourteen political parties that took part in the elections branded the other parties as “foreign agents.” There were massive irregularities in the polls, and the ruling Awami League candidates were declared elected in 293 out of 300 constituencies. Five independent, one JSD—the main opposition party—and one Jatiya League candidate got elected in the elections. Meanwhile, freedom of expression was being curtailed by the regime, acute factionalism in the ruling party, and discontent among army officers and troops over the creation of the paramilitary Rakkhi Bahini were also growing.⁶⁴

The First Rigged Elections in Bangladesh

As, late National Professor Abdur Razzaque reveals, Mujib had shown his dislike for having any opposition in the parliament. Razzaque tells Ahmed

Sofa (a renowned Bangladeshi writer) that Mujib simply turned down his advice to concede 100 out of 300 seats to the opposition in the parliament, and that “while history had given Mujib an opportunity to become a statesman, he could not take advantage of it.”⁶⁵ Renowned Bangladeshi leftist politician Haider Akber Khan Rono also substantiates the truth about Mujib’s allergy to having any opposition to his rule. Mujib is said to have retorted to Rono’s claim that the opposition would get dozens of seats in the parliamentary Elections of 1973 in the following manner: “The opposition will not get more than five seats It’s better that I don’t state this in public because if they [opposition leaders] come to know about it, they will not take part in the Elections.”⁶⁶ Thus, seemingly, the 1973s parliamentary elections under Mujib’s overall supervision were at best political games played on uneven playing fields in favour of the ruling party, and at worst farcical, grossly rigged. The elections were the first rigged ones in the history of Bangladesh.

The ruling Awami League party candidates used government transports, including helicopters, and money from state-run enterprises, and got exclusive publicity through government-run media outlets.⁶⁷ Thus, most opposition party leaders unanimously called the polling exercise rigged in favour of the ruling party. According to Freedom Fighter and JSD’s secretary-general ASM Abdur Rab, opposition leaders “were forced to lose the elections.” JSD President Major (retd.) Abdul Jalil told journalists that while the government had not allowed any polling agent to his party candidates, the ruling party had resorted to massive rigging, violence against opposition candidates and voters, and had fabricated election results at various polling centres. Muzaffar Ahmed and Pankaj Bhattacharya of the National Awami Party in a joint statement on 9 March claimed that had the polls been fair, at least seventy opposition candidates would have got elected. Opposition leaders, in a joint-press conference on 11 March, said more or less the same thing about massive vote-rigging by the government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.⁶⁸ Renowned Indian journalist Basant Chatterjee in his eyewitness accounts of Bangladesh in 1973 reveals that at certain places the ruling Awami League polled as low as 20 per cent of votes, and was still declared the winner.⁶⁹ One foreign analyst observes: “Both the police and members of the Awami League were prominent in their presence in the polling booths.”⁷⁰ Interestingly, dozens of opposition candidates who had been earlier unofficially declared elected by state-run

TV and radio were eventually declared losers. They include Major Abdul Jalil, Rashed Khan Menon, Shahjahan Siraj, and Suranjit Sengupta. From at least six constituencies, ballot boxes were taken to Dhaka by helicopters for a re-count, and soon apparently defeated ruling-party candidates were declared winners.⁷¹ The last straw to shatter the credibility of the 1973 parliamentary elections under Mujib is an account by National Professor Anisuzzaman (who was an active supporter of the Awami League regime under Sheikh Hasina). He gives an account of what happened on the election day at a polling station in Chittagong University campus. Anisuzzaman and several of his colleagues from the University, including Vice-Chancellor Innas Ali, Professor Muhammad Ali and Registrar Khalilur Rahman went to cast their votes but could not vote as they discovered that their votes had already been cast.⁷² According to Rieta Rahman, daughter of late Masihur Rahman aka Jadu Mia of Nilphamari district—who was a renowned opposition leader—his late father was also a victim of the rigging process. Instead of counting the votes at the polling centres—which is normative in the country—the ballot boxes were helicoptered to Dhaka for vote-counting, and at the end of the day, Jadu Mia was declared a loser.⁷³

Last but not least, as late Abul Mansur Ahmed, a renowned politician, writer and a co-founder of the Awami League, and late National Professor Abdur Razzaque of Dhaka University had first-hand experience of Mujib's unwillingness to accommodate a strong opposition in the parliament,⁷⁴ there is no room for giving him any benefit of the doubt with the assumption that circumstances possibly forced him to become autocratic. And his tacit support for election rigging ultimately led to his violent overthrow in August 1975. So much so that one American diplomat felt: "The elections of March 1973 were the beginning of the end Regrettably, Awami League leaders couldn't resist padding the result by blatantly and unnecessarily rigging the polls. This exacerbated what would become, in a few months, widespread and growing popular discontent with Mujib and the League."⁷⁵ There is no reason to believe that Mujib had no idea about what was going on during the parliamentary elections in March 1973, with regard to the massive vote-rigging in favour of the ruling party. He himself was a candidate in four constituencies and was declared the winner in all of them. However, his winning a seat from a constituency at Bhola, in southern Bangladesh, and that too "uncontested," was yet another

affirmation about the massive rigging and intimidation of opposition candidates by ruling-party activists. Dr Azharuddin from the opposition JSD party was a formidable candidate (who won 1970 election as an Awami League candidate) against Mujib in Bhola. However, Awami League supporters kidnapped him the day he was supposed to submit his nomination papers to the local election commission. His “failure” to submit nomination papers led to Mujib “uncontested” victory.⁷⁶

Interestingly, while in March 1973 the Awami League under Mujib rigged the national elections, in August, his son Sheikh Kamal—who was a student at Dhaka University—was instrumental in stopping an anti-government student organization from holding any office in politically influential Dhaka University Central Student Union (DUCSU). Masked gunmen, believed to be members of the pro-government Student League, hijacked ballot boxes at different polling centres in Dhaka University, moments before the counting of ballots began, as pro-Mujib candidates were going to lose the elections, very badly.⁷⁷ This writer, who as a teacher at Dhaka University was assigned to help the University authorities to hold the elections is eyewitness to the incident. According to a former JSD activist, Mohiuddin Ahmed, Sheikh Kamal himself kidnapped two prominent pro-JSD student leaders, A.F.M. Mahbubul Haque and Aftabuddin Ahmed, in the morning of the election day physically abused them and kept them confined to a house for the whole day, so that they would not be able to work for opposition candidates. Kamal released them on the condition of not publicizing the incident in the media.⁷⁸

It is quite intriguing that Sheikh Mujib who was at the peak of his popularity during 1969–1971, lost it in no time. By 1973, people in Bangladesh openly cracked jokes about his nepotism and favouritism, incompetence, corruption, and ruthlessness. One such famous joke in circulation in the early 1970s went like this: “One day the Satan was missing and was soon discovered paying obeisance to Mujib. On asking, Satan replied: ‘I only harmed Adam and Eve and God expelled me from the Paradise; and this man harms his entire nation, and nothing happens to him. I just want to know the secret from him!’” The famous Indian journalist Basant Chatterjee in his eyewitness account of Bangladesh in 1973 gives a vivid description of the lack of ethics and morality among freedom fighters and supporters of the Mujib government who only loved and worshipped money, and were busy amassing ill-gotten wealth and properties. So much

so, according to Chatterjee, that when the looted property was discovered from Mujib's sons and nephews, he is said to have told off the moralists: "What harm is done if those who gave their blood for the country's freedom enjoyed for some time the use of certain things they really needed?"⁷⁹ What Chatterjee wrote about Mujib's alleged defence of his corrupt relatives and cronies might have been hearsay, nevertheless, it was part of the bazaar gossip and politically motivated jokes in circulation across Bangladesh during the Mujib era. These jokes and sarcasm are what James Scott calls "weapons of the week."⁸⁰

Mujib's Legacy: Rakkhi Bahini and BAKSAL Dictatorship

While leftist (Maoist groups) and the radical national socialist (JSD) attacks on ruling-party leaders, workers and law-enforcers may be classified as terrorism and insurgencies, Mujib's law-enforcers, especially the para-military Rakkhi Bahini's selective and indiscriminate killing of civilians, were pure acts of state terrorism. And, Mujib cannot be totally exonerated from these acts by his own security forces, which, many believe, were raised to counter the Army to pave the way for Mujib's one-party rule, seemingly, which he contemplated to establish not long after his return from Pakistan in January 1972. The JSD, which came into being under former radical nationalist student leaders and a dismissed major (Jalil) who was a freedom fighter in late 1972, posed a formidable challenge to the Mujib regime, which neither had the will nor had the ability to address the acute problems of hunger, mass destitution and rampant corruption. The Army, in general, despised the Rakkhi Bahini as an unprofessional and undisciplined force, which was only accountable to Mujib himself, and was created out of nondescript elements, many having served the *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters). When the number swelled to 25,000, a rumour circulated that Mujib would soon substitute it for the Bangladesh Army. Many analysts and scholars believed that the Rakkhi Bahini "was no different than Hitler's Brown Shirts or the Gestapo," and that Mujib and the Rakkhi Bahini, not the Army, posed the more significant threat to the country. The Rakkhi Bahini, in short, established a reign of terror in small towns and rural areas, and "Mujib could not avoid responsibility for the climate of fear and terror

that gripped the country,” observes Lawrence Ziring.⁸¹ Since for the right or wrong reasons, Bangladesh has inherited the legacies of Sheikh Mujib’s short rule (1972–1975), which was a toxic combination of incompetence and corruption.

One gets some glimpses of the dysfunctional state of Bangladesh during the Mujib era from newspaper headlines. One may cite the following headlines from the pro-government daily *Ittefaq* (having the largest circulation) and two opposition-run dailies, *Ganokantha* and *Sonar Bangla*, in 1973 in this regard: “Eight secret killings in one week at Jhinaidaho” (1 July 1973); “Dhaka-Aricha Road—Robbers rule after sunset” (2 July 1973); “While people are starving on the one side, on the other, wheat from government warehouses are being sold in black-market” (7 April 1973); “People in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are mainly living on weeds, roots, bamboo and cane shoots, snails, mushrooms,” and “There has been a rise in the number of naked people in rural Bangladesh” (10 May 1973); “They are starving, and cannot come out as they do not have clothes” (30 May 1973). The daily *Ganokontho*’s headlines also revealed hunger and lawlessness across Bangladesh in the same year: “Hungry people sell their children, so far nine starved to death at Habiganj” (3 May 1973); “Suicide and rampant prostitution among the poor” (1 June 1973); “Ten people starved to death, everywhere only one chant ‘give me some rice’” (10 May 1973). Some headlines of the *Sonar Bangla* went like this: “Police armoury attacked, arms taken away, four dead at Barisal” (4 July 1973); “Police outpost attacked, all arms taken away” (12 July 1973); “Bank robbery at Chittagong, a grenade attack at Laldighi, 18 injured” (15 August 1973); “In 20 months, 1618 robberies and murders at Jamalpur” (17 November 1973); and “Another police outpost attacked, three policemen missing” (13 July 1973).⁸²

It was not coincidental that the first mysterious disappearance of a renowned filmmaker-cum-director, author and freedom fighter Zahir Raihan took place soon after the Liberation during the Mujib era. The first extra-judicial killing or “crossfire” in popular Bangladeshi parlance, that of a Leftist politician Siraj Sikdar took place while Mujib was the President under his one-party rule in January 1975. The first killing of prisoners in jail took place during his regime; police gunned down four JSD supporters in jail while Mujib was the Prime Minister. The massive vote-rigging during the parliamentary and Dhaka University Student Union elections

took place in 1973. The first major manmade famine in the Post-Liberation period took place in 1974. The whole nation became familiar with the expression “hijacker” during the Mujib era, while frequent hijacking and brutal killing of hijackers on street became the norm in the early 1970s. The “public execution” of seven students, the infamous “seven-murders,” of Dhaka University took place on campus on 4 April 1974. Meanwhile, signs of an impending famine were visible. So much so that UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim “warned of imminent starvation” in the country unless the serious food shortage was addressed on an urgent basis. While Mujib admitted 27,000 people had died of starvation, the unofficial figure of death toll in the 1974 famine was around 1.5 million.⁸³

Amartya Sen’s study reveals that around 80,000–100,000 people died of starvation in Rangpur district alone. Sen’s study also rebuts Mujib administration’s attributing the famine to crop failures in floods. He argues that Bangladesh was “chronically dependent on imports of food from abroad,” especially the US, but in 1974 Bangladesh managed to import 1.6 million tons of food grains in comparison to 2.3 million tons in 1973. Despite the US government’s seeking stoppage of Bangladesh’s trade with Cuba—a “blacklisted country” to the US administration—the latter paid no heed to that advice and exported jute products to Cuba. And, this led to the US sanctions against Bangladesh. It stopped sending any food grains to the country under the PL480 programme as under US law, USAID recipient countries cannot trade with “blacklisted” countries. So, the famine was mainly due to the Mujib administration’s inept foreign policy, and unabated smuggling of goods, including food grains, from Bangladesh to India. Thus, although 1974 was a “local peak year in terms of both total output and per capita output of rice” in Bangladesh, the country experienced the worst famine in its history after 1943.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Mujib had alienated some top party leaders, including Tajuddin Ahmed, the first Prime Minister of the country during the Liberation War and the Finance Minister in Mujib’s cabinet, and General Osmani. On 26 October 1974, by “making him a scapegoat for the economic crisis,” Mujib forced Tajuddin to resign his position as the Finance Minister.⁸⁵ General Osmani resigned his position as a minister and distanced himself from Mujib’s authoritarian style of governance.

Whether Mujib or the extra-ordinary situation that prevailed in war-ravaged Bangladesh in the 1970s was responsible for these types of

unheard-of incidents might be a debatable proposition, but one cannot exonerate him for some of the above incidents, especially the famine of 1974, extra-judicial killings and rampant corruption and nepotism under his nose. Mujib may be held responsible for the introduction of “socialism” or “state-capitalism” and one-party rule under the Bangladesh Peasants’ and Workers’ Awami League (BAKSAL), which became by-words for corruption, cronyism and inefficiency. One wonders, who else but Mujib be held responsible for the extra-judicial killing of Siraj Sikdar (a Maoist leader) in police custody as afterwards, he bragged about it and said in a televised speech in the parliament: “Where is Siraj Sikdar today? I am constrained by my status as the Father of the Nation, otherwise I would have ruthlessly smothered my opponents!” He gave this speech on 25 January 1975, three weeks after this extra-judicial killing.

No single folly by the Patriarch was deadlier for his regime, and for himself and most family members than the creation of the proto-Soviet one-party government in the country. It was his nemesis and the nation’s last straw. Most Bangladeshi university teachers felt their employers’ asking them to join the ruling party (BAKSAL) was frightful and humiliating. By mid-1975 from military generals to top bureaucrats had joined the BAKSAL, while all other political parties had been proscribed. The situation was not that different from what prevailed in the Soviet Union. Clenched-fisted BAKSAL workers’ orchestrated shouting in public places in 1975: *Ek Neta, Ek Desh; Bangabandhu-Bangladesh* (One-Leader, One-Country; Bangabandhu-Bangladesh), which may be likened to Nazi and Fascist slogans in Europe in the 1930s–1940s. In spite of this, what took our breath away was the brutal killing of Mujib and most of his family members—including his ten-year-old son and pregnant daughter-in-law. What was even more startling—and sickening to the extreme—was the way all his cabinet ministers barring a few, and most of his close associates and party-men either joined hands with Mushtaque, the new President, or publicly rejoiced the killing as “necessary” and “unavoidable.” Newspaper editorials glorifying the killers demonized Mujib and his rule in justification for the killing and the new regime under Mushtaque. While the military-backed Mushtaque regime glorified the killers as “brave sons of the liberation war,” the successive governments kept most of them employed at Bangladeshi missions abroad until the election of Sheikh Hasina, Mujib’s daughter, was the new Prime Minister in 1996. Interestingly, most Awami League

ministers, excepting Mansur Ali, Qamruzzaman, Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed, who were presumably killed by Mushtaque's men on 3 November 1975 in Dhaka Central Jail, had been loyal to the new regime. And, as the three military chiefs under Mujib remained loyal to Mushtaque, so was General Osmani, who became Mushtaque's defence adviser, and was among the first few people to have gone to the Dhaka Radio Station to meet and possibly congratulate Major Dalim, who made the announcement over the radio that Mujib and his family members had been killed by Bangladesh Army troops in the early hours of 15 August 1975.

Mujib brought about the constitutional changes in quick succession. In view of the continuation of the famine situation and deteriorating law-and-order situation, on 28 December 1974 he declared the state of emergency, which was a provision in the Constitution, suspending all fundamental rights of the people for a year. Following the assassination of a ruling-party MP and two ruling-party members, on 25 January 1975 Mujib brought about the "most significant and radical changes" in the Constitution of the country. Instead of taking any action against hoarders, black marketeers, smugglers and extortionists, who mostly belonged to the ruling party, on that fateful day, the ruling party introduced a bill for the amendment of the Constitution (the 4th Amendment), and in less than an hour, it became an act without any discussion or debate in the parliament. The 4th Amendment abolished the parliamentary system, banned all political parties, including the Awami League, and Mujib became the President of the Republic. The desperate and adamant Mujib went ahead with his vision of the so-called Second Revolution by floating a new political party (BAKSAL) on 24 February 1975. This became the only registered or legal party, also the ruling party of the country. This virtually signalled the beginning of a Soviet-style one-party dictatorship in Bangladesh. Soon thousands of teachers/intellectuals, journalists, professionals, and even bureaucrats and military officers voluntarily or involuntarily joined the BAKSAL. Mujib justified the reasons for one-party rule, the main reason being the integration of the vast majority of illiterate Bangladeshis (around 80 per cent) into the mainstream of politics, which hitherto had been under elite domination. Those MPs who did not join the BAKSAL, lost their parliament seat, in accordance with the BAKSAL Act, which abrogated the Constitution, stated that there would be no MP from any opposition party, and unless they joined BAKSAL they would automatically lose their

membership in the parliament.⁸⁶ The BAKSAL had five sections or “leagues”: a) Farmer; b) Worker; c) Women; d) Youth; and e) Student Leagues.⁸⁷ And, Mujib declared he would himself choose his opposition.⁸⁸ Barring a handful of Mujib’s MPs and ministers, including M.A.G. Osmani, Tajuddin Ahmed, Barrister Moinul Hussain, Nur-e-Alam Siddiqui, and few others, all joined the BAKSAL party, which established a Soviet-style socialist dictatorship in Bangladesh. Interestingly, labour leader Abdul Mannan, head of Mujib’s *Lal Bahini* (Red Brigade), was arrested in January 1975 for opposing the formation of the one-party government by Mujib.⁸⁹

Ideology for Legitimacy: Intimidation, Deception and Autocracy

Mujib had two mentors, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1892–1963) and Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani (1880–1976), during the formative years of his political career, but no ideologues in the true sense of the expression. Although Jinnah’s Two-Nation Theory was, sort of, the cornerstone of the Pakistan Movement during the last ten years of British Raj, the theory had lots of loopholes, and most importantly, there was nothing so rigid about it; it was subject to modifications, compromise and even total abandonment by its creator. Both Suhrawardy and Bhashani moulded Mujib’s politics, which was less in ideology and more in realpolitik, during the colonial, postcolonial and post-Bangladesh periods. As Pakistan was not inevitable and the demand for Pakistan was subject to modifications, so were Mujib’s Six Points, his mute and ambiguous demands for Bangladesh, and even the emergence of Bangladesh up to 25 March 1971. So, in a way, Mujib’s ideology was as hazy and ambiguous as that of Jinnah’s. As Jinnah’s 11 August 1947 speech in the Constituent Assembly in favour of a “secular state” contradicted his earlier and later assertions about following Shariah as the Constitution of Pakistan, similarly, Mujib’s public support for democracy belied his undemocratic actions, especially the establishment of a one-party dictatorship under his tutelage. Let us look as to how his political ideology evolved in the Post-Liberation period and its short- and long-term effects on the polity of Bangladesh.

What Mujib and his followers proclaimed as the national ideology of Bangladesh, a four-pronged package of democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism, did not click with the vast majority of Bangladeshis. They remained sceptical to angry and grossly confused about the Nehruvian concoction of ideologies being sold as *Mujibbad* or Mujibism. One may disagree with Althusser, who denies any correlation between ideology and consciousness. To him ideology is a “pure illusion,” a “pure dream”—having nothing to do with consciousness.⁹⁰ Why *Mujibbad* was doomed to be a failure at its very inception because an ideology imposed by the ruling elites—as Jorge Larraín theorizes—which is detached from the people’s day-to-day problem generates “false consciousness” among the masses,⁹¹ is never durable and backfires, eventually. Among other reasons why *Mujibbad* backfired, one believes the radically transformed society of Post-Liberation Bangladesh, which was much more “ideologically mature” than what it had been before the Liberation War, was not prepared to accept some vague, contradictory and unheard-of concepts as the new ideology of independent Bangladesh. Mujib and his associates simply failed to realize that people in war-ravaged, famine-stricken Post-Liberation Bangladesh, with fresh memories of the war, were very different from what it had been before the Liberation. If ideological maturity is the byword for class consciousness, then Bangladeshis in the 1970s were simply *not* available for leaders to mobilize them politically by a proto-fascist ideology called *Mujibbad*. One finds Marx quite pertinent to understand the psyche of the Bangladeshis during the Mujib era; that is, “It is not the consciousness of people that determines their existence but it is their social existence that determines their consciousness.”⁹²

Now, we need to understand why Mujib and his associates suddenly started a country-wide campaign for the establishment of *Mujibbad*, which was nothing but a carbon copy of Nehru’s democratic, socialist, secular nationalism. While Nehru hammered his ideology into the body-politic of India out of commitment and for the sake of national integration by appeasing the non-Hindu minorities and marginalized classes, tribes, castes and communities, Mujib’s over-zealous penchant for establishing *Mujibbad* in Bangladesh reflected his unpreparedness to lead the poor nation and his desire to simultaneously legitimize and glorify his regime as something magnificent, hence adorable. Again, it is noteworthy, Nehru became an avid champion of “scientific socialism” in the 1920s and more or less, retained

his commitment to the ideology throughout his life, although due to Gandhi's overpowering influence and the exigencies of his role as Prime Minister he modified his commitment to socialism, a lot.⁹³ Nehru, like most of his contemporaries in Indian politics, also wore Indian attire, including his *sadri* or waistcoat. Interestingly, Mujib also copied Nehru's waistcoat as his trademark, which is still known as "Mujib-Coat" across Bangladesh! In the above backdrop, it would be fair to assume that as there was nothing original about *Mujibbad*, so it was not sustainable. Again, *Mujibbad* was a combination of opposites! While it was a combination of Nehruvian secular, democratic socialism with Hitleresque national-socialism, the latter outweighing the former in accordance with Mujib's penchant for absolute rule turned Bangladesh under his tutelage into another Uganda under Idi Amin, an unsafe, poor and dysfunctional country. And his introduction of a Soviet-style one-party rule through the BAKSAL was the proverbial last straw! Mujib lacked the understanding of the implications of identifying the Bangladeshis as "Bengalis," which technically entitled Bengalis living in India the right to ask for Bangladeshi passports. Even worse, his 1973 speech in the parliament asking the non-Bengali Hill Tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts to become "Bengali" sounded very chauvinistic. Within a few years, this triggered massive guerrilla warfare for the independence of the Hill Tracts from Bangladesh. Finally, his giving state patronage to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity—his government's allowing recitation of the Qur'an, Bible, Geeta and Tripitak on state functions and state-run radio and TV outlets—violated the very core of secularism in the public domain. The state of Bangladesh under Mujib officially became a multi-theocracy, from the ideological point of view. Seemingly, like his political and economic policies, his political ideologies were at best confusing, well beyond the understanding of scholars and laymen!

Interestingly, neither Mujib himself nor his associates ever espoused socialism and secularism, as the cornerstones of the Awami League. Since one of Mujib's mentors, Suhrawardy espoused liberal democracy in a capitalist set-up, and another, Bhashani championed a hodgepodge of "Islamic Socialism," *Mujibbad* or Mujibism does not seem to be a derivative of either Suhrawardy's or Bhashani's brainchild. The other influences on Mujib besides Nehru's in regard to his transformation as a "socialist" first came from the Young Turks of Awami League under the enigmatic Serajul Alam Khan and the elderly pro-Soviet Bangladesh

Communist Party Chief Moni Singh. Before Khan and Mujib parted each other's company in late 1972, whatever "socialist" policies the Mujib government had adopted by then by nationalizing industries and financial institutions were due to the pressure from the Young Turks of Awami League. In October 1972, with the blessings of Serajul Alam Khan, they formed the JSD (literally the National Socialist Party of Bangladesh), which Gowher Rizvi aptly classifies as "ostensibly a left-wing party, but in reality, a quasi-fascist group."⁹⁴ Soon, Mujib came under the influence of the Soviet Orbit, and Moni Singh had been the main conduit for the transmission of Soviet-style socialism to Bangladesh. Mujib's BAKSAL was almost a replica of the Soviet Communist Party. Even its central committee was called the "Presidium!" So, there was nothing original or primeval about Mujib's or his party's leftist or socialist commitments. Prior to 1969, Awami League's powerful student front, East Pakistan Students' League (EPSL), aka Chhatro League, never ever espoused socialism from its platform. As this writer recalls as a student of Dhaka University during 1966–1971, a radical section of the pro-Awami League EPSL started chanting socialist slogans, drawing pro-socialist graffiti on campus walls and distributing pro-socialist booklets among students. They were the nuclei of what later emerged as the JSD. Nevertheless, they infiltrated the Awami League while Mujib was in Pakistani prison as a convict of the Agartala Conspiracy Case (1966–1969).

As elaborated before, Mujib's BAKSAL was the epitome of his fatal experiment with "socialism." His "socialism" apparently had two purposes, a) to keep "young radicals" happy; and b) to make the state "the chief source of patronage" for his cronies. Urban intermediaries related to the ruling party were the main beneficiaries of Mujib's "socialism."⁹⁵ Meanwhile, Mujib's so-called political philosophy was being sold across Bangladesh by his associates and supporters. Former pro-Mujib student leader Tofael Ahmed's definition of *Mujibbad* is nothing but a eulogy of Mujib's: "Lenin gave socialism not democracy, Abraham Lincoln gave democracy but no socialism. But it is only Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who has given both. *Mujibbad* is the Third Ideology in the world."⁹⁶ Hence the Awami slogans: *Vishwe elo notun bad, Mujibbad*, *Mujibbad* [A new ideology is around, Mujibism, Mujibism]; and *Ek Neta ek Desh, Bangabandhu, Bangladesh* [One Leader, One Country, Bangabandhu (Friend of Bengal or Mujib), Bangladesh]. Interestingly, Mujib himself

declared at a public rally in Dhaka on 6 June 1972: “Scientific socialism will be established in Bangladesh on a permanent basis.” Some speakers publicly threatened those who were sceptical or opposed to *Mujibbad* : “Anyone going against *Mujibbad* , will be severely dealt with. We will knock off their teeth.” Meanwhile, the Young Turks under the leadership of ASM Abdur Rab and Shahjahan Siraj—Dhaka University student leaders and freedom fighters—who later joined the JSD, publicly opposed *Mujibbad* . On 12 May 1972, they declared: “We don’t believe in *Mujibbad* , we believe only scientific socialism will lead to people’s emancipation.” And, pro-Mujib Chhatro League leaders, Nur-e-Alam Siddiqi and Abdul Quddus Makhan demanded *Mujibbad* be incorporated into the Constitution of Bangladesh. Abdur Razzaq asserted publicly: “We will show the world how democracy and socialism can co-exist.”⁹⁷ The most astounding reason behind thing about the deification of Mujib as the Philosopher King of Bangladesh or the “Best Bengali of the Last Millennium” is not only his intellectually not-so-well-endowed followers and beneficiaries who have eulogized him as the greatest leader of Bengal, but academics like Cambridge-educated Rehman Sobhan who are also among such blind admirers. In the early 1970s, Sobhan was a Member of the Planning Commission under Mujib, and he and another renowned economist, Nurul Islam, paved the way for the adoption of Soviet-style command economy to run a poverty-stricken country like Bangladesh. Not only was Sobhan imprudent for favouring socialism, which embodied corruption and inefficiency in every field of the country’s political economy under Mujib, but he believes, more than four decades after Mujib’s demise, that socialism would have served Bangladesh better than any other system. Sobhan expresses his disappointment at the lack of solidarity among the once socialist countries in Eastern Europe. They could not care less about helping Bangladesh during its economic hardship under Mujib. In addition, he mildly criticizes Mujib for his authoritarian and intrusive style of managing the administration, which increased inertia and stifled decision making due to Mujib’s overbearing influence and intrusion.⁹⁸

As the following section reveals, people’s unacceptance of *Mujibbad* , which translated into unbridled dictatorship in the name of democracy and socialism, eventually led to the tragic end of Mujib and his one-party dictatorship. The JSD and Maoist Siraj Sikdar’s *Sarbahara Party* posed the biggest existential threats to the Mujib regime. In slightly more than a year

between January 1972 and April 1973 alone, according to government statistics, 4925 Bangladeshis got killed at the hands of “miscreants” or leftist guerrillas, who attacked twenty-three police stations, killed law-enforcers and plundered arms and ammunition across the country. As many as 6000 political murders took place during the first sixteen months of Liberation.⁹⁹ In sum, while *Mujibbad* was Mujib’s ideological bandwagon to disseminate his ideas in the quest for absolute power for himself and his party, the establishment of the one-party dictatorship under BAKSAL was the culmination of those ideas.

Who Killed Mujib and Why!

The JSD which in late 1972 emerged out of the Awami League as a splinter group espousing “scientific socialism” was championed by some former pro-Awami League student leaders under Serajul Alam Khan, who had been much more radical than Mujib and the mainstream of his party, and wanted nothing less than complete independence for Bangladesh. It had formed a leftist revolutionary militia called *Gono Bahini* (People’s Army), in preparation for an armed insurrection against the Mujib regime. During 1974–1975, the *Gono Bahini* was engaged in violent attacks on law-enforcers and Awami Leaguers throughout Bangladesh. As the *Gono Bahini* was adamant to overthrow the Mujib regime, so were some other dissident groups and individuals, from the Left and Right, including the ruling Awami League or BAKSAL. Some dissident military officers, including some top brasses, also jumped on the bandwagon. Seemingly, by mid-1975 Mujib’s fate was sealed. Without going into details about who killed Mujib and his associates, one may classify the main reasons as for economic, political, personal and geopolitical. However, one is not sure if the 1974 famine—which killed more than a million Bangladeshis—or Mujib’s introduction of the one-party dictatorship was the last straw! A.L. Khatib and Anthony Mascarenhas have given details of personal factors behind the Mujib killing. From their accounts, it appears that as if some disgruntled army officers, especially Major (retd.) Dalim (Shariful Haque) and Lt. Col. (dismissed) Farooq Rahman, played the decisive role in the killing!¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, from the confessional statements of two convicted Mujib assailants, Lt. Col. (retd.) Mohiuddin Ahmed and Lt. Col. (dismissed) Farooq Rahman it appears that the then deputy chief of the Army Maj. Gen.

Ziaur Rahman was aware of the conspiracy to kill Mujib by some army officers, but was not committed to the cause.¹⁰¹ According to Lt. Col. (dismissed) Syed Farooq Rahman's confessional statement in court:

In 1974, some untoward incidents happened when the accused A-1 [Farooq Rahman] went to Demra, Narayanganj, Munshiganj and Narsingdi area, for recovery of arms and ammunitions which was within the knowledge of the President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman but he had not taken any action. As such, he developed disrespect for the leaders of Awami League. At that time some officers and troops from First Bengal Lancer ransacked the house of Gazi Golam Mostafa [an influential Awami League MP and Mujib's confidant] in consequence of an unpleasant incident involving the wife of Major Dalim and the son of Awami League leader Gazi Golam Mostafa at the Ladies Club. Following this incident, Major Dalim, Major Nur and some others lost their jobs because of a breach of discipline. At that time, the then Deputy Chief of Army Staff, Major General Ziaur Rahman along with his family members used to walk down to his residence. He used to discuss the situation of the country with the accused (Farooq) and one day, during the conversation, he instigated him to do something to salvage the country It was also decided to discuss the matter with General Ziaur Rahman and accordingly in the month of April the accused (Farooq) went to his house and discussed the precarious situation of the country. *When asked for his suggestion, General Zia, instead of promising any help, told them to do whatever they could on their own.* [Emphasis added]¹⁰²

It is worth mentioning here that since conspiracy theories abound about as to who killed Mujib and why it is better not to mention them at all. One is not sure if the CIA or Pakistan played any role in the killing of Mujib and the overthrow of his pro-Soviet one-party rule. Nevertheless, Mujib got killed for his messy domestic and foreign policies. However, as his killing and overthrow of the regime are important, so are their immediate and long-term effects, within and beyond Bangladesh. Before we further delve into the issue as to who killed Mujib and why let us look at what an ardent Mujib admirer and Awami League supporter—not the opportunist-types

who change sides frequently—writes in this regard. Ali Gowher (aka Gowher Rizvi), who taught at Oxford and Harvard (as of March 2021) is the current International Affairs Adviser to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh. A critical appraisal of Rizvi's eulogy to Mujib takes us closer to the truth. Rizvi raises a few issues regarding Bangladesh's transition from a democratic polity to one-party rule under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and later his assassination in a coup on 15 August 1975. He thinks, "Even without these problems [Mujib's bad governance] Bangladesh would have been in difficulty." However, it is difficult to agree with Rizvi that: "His [Mujib's] selfless sacrifice in giving the Bengalis an identity had endeared him to the people and a deep bond united the leader with the people: a bond which remained unbroken up to his death, although he lacked any sophisticated knowledge of running a modern government."¹⁰³ It is also difficult to agree with Rizvi that since Mujib preferred "populist traditions" of Bangladesh politics to the "elitist" ones, he "provided the bridge" between the two traditions, through his one-party dictatorship. One, however, agrees with Rizvi that, "Mujib was carried away by his own appeal and mass adulation. He became a prisoner of his own slogans He failed to realize, however, that the war, independence and ensuing destruction had changed the picture. Nor could he see that his impoverished country would have to depend on its own resources."¹⁰⁴ Finally, Mujib's short-lived collectivization of agriculture drove away landowning peasants—irrespective of the size of their holdings—from his camp. So, only "six majors" did not kill him and overthrow his regime.

As the proliferation of multiple versions of the story about who killed Mujib and why it has remained another unresolved issue like who first declared the independence of Bangladesh, and how many Bengalis Pakistani soldiers were killed in 1971. There are at least two diametrically opposite versions of the story: a) one from the Awami camp, which singles out "anti-Liberation" and "pro-Pakistani" forces, which also implicates Ziaur Rahman, as the coupmakers and killers of Mujib; and b) the other version from the anti-Awami and pro-BNP is that most top Awami leaders were directly or indirectly responsible for the coup that killed Mujib and overthrew his regime. There are at least two other versions, one from the "leftist" JSD supporters, and another from some of the army officers who planned and participated in the coup. Both the versions point fingers at Zia. A former JSD activist and author Mohiuddin Ahmed has even gone to the

extent of attributing the following assertion to Colonel (retd.) Abu Taher, who was a close associate of the JSD and among the planners of the coup that violently overthrew the Mujib regime: “Taher wanted Mujib’s body to be thrown into the Bay of Bengal, so that his followers would never be able to turn his grave into a mausoleum.” Ahmed’s well-researched work also reveals that by late 1974 Mujib was desperate to refurbish his tarnished image through a “national party,” and sought JSD’s main philosopher and one of the main organizers of the Liberation War Serajul Alam Khan’s support, which the latter declined and asked Mujib to form a “national government” instead.¹⁰⁵

As this writer recalls, although around 800 soldiers staged the coup and only around half a dozen tanks were at some important intersections of Dhaka city, there was absolutely no protest against the killing of Mujib and his family members anywhere across Bangladesh. As the Army, Navy, Air Force, police, border security forces, the Rakkhi Bahini and other paramilitary forces but tens of thousands of pro-Awami League students, labourers and ordinary people also remained quiet and in compliance with the directives of the handful of army officers (including the retired and dismissed ones) who took over the country in the early hours of 15 August 1975. While there was no public mourning for the killings, let alone any protest against the coup makers, thousands of Bangladeshis at home and abroad publicly celebrated the violent overthrow of the Mujib regime. This writer witnessed people publicly celebrating the overthrow of the regime, in Dhaka city—in close proximity to the Dhaka University—the moment they heard Major (retd.) Dalim’s (one of the coupmakers) declaration over Bangladesh radio that the Bangladesh armed forces staged a “revolution,” killed Mujib and his family members, and Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed (who was a senior minister in Mujib’s cabinet) was the new President of the Republic. Within hours of the coup d’état, most of Mujib’s close associates and ministers, barring three or four, took oath as ministers in the Mushtaque cabinet. Interestingly, while the oath-taking ceremony was in progress, Mujib’s bullet-riddled body was still lying on the stairs of his residence. The day after the coup, newspapers reported and published photos of General Osmani meeting Major Dalim at the Dhaka Radio Station.¹⁰⁶ Among others, another freedom fighter, Colonel (retd.) Abu Taher also went to see Dalim and other coup makers and is said to have reprimanded Major Dalim for his inability to draft a martial law proclamation and is said

to have bragged about his “boys” who had blasted several “bombs” (firecrackers) at Dhaka University the night before (on 14 August) Mujib’s scheduled visit to the Campus. Although Taher did not take part in the coup, he had close links with the coup makers, affirms a former JSD activist.¹⁰⁷ As mentioned above, Taher wanted Mujib’s body to be thrown into the Bay of Bengal. In sum, Islamists or “pro-Pakistan” or “anti-Liberation” people did not overthrow the Mujib regime. While his inefficient and corrupt government dismayed the bulk of Bangladeshis, especially after the devastating famine of 1974, which killed more than a million Bangladeshis, his introduction of the Soviet-style one-party dictatorship was the proverbial last straw for him and his regime. Various leftist and nationalist forces wanted to overthrow his regime. However, it would be a travesty of facts that many Islamist and pro-Pakistani elements, and even people like Maulana Bhashani—who had been a proponent of independent Bangladesh—did not play the Islami and India cards to discredit the Mujib regime as anti-Islam and pro-India. Bhashani’s weekly *Haq Katha* played almost a decisive role in this regard. Its vitriols against India and the Mujib government garnished with Islamic rhetoric generated anti-Indian, anti-Mujib and pro-Islamic, if not pro-Pakistani sentiment among the ordinary Bangladeshi Muslims until its proscription by the government.¹⁰⁸ And, finally a section of the ruling party under the leadership of Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed—who was a cabinet minister—with the active participation of a handful of soldiers staged the August Coup of 1975 that killed Mujib and overthrew the one-party BAKSAL regime. Although it is difficult to pinpoint with absolute precision if internal or external/geopolitical factors played the most important role in the August Coup of 1975, we may consider stories narrated by foreign writers, analysts and observers as relatively objective accounts of who killed Mujib, toppled his regime, and why! Contrary to some conspiracy theories, there is no credible evidence of any US involvement in the Mujib assassination. As Ali Riaz cites a State Department official’s confidential memo to Kissinger that on Kissinger’s informing Mujib about the coup plan, he (Mujib) simply “brushed it off, scoffed at it, said nobody would do a thing like that to him.”¹⁰⁹

However, as Zillur Rahman Khan argues, there were remote and immediate causes of the coup, political, ideological, and “from settling personal vendettas against Mujib’s family to protecting the interests of the

Bangladesh Army vis-à-vis the Jatio Rakkhi Bahini to preventing the devolution of politico-economic power from the powerful bureaucracies to the grassroots administration, and to arresting the development of secular nationalism [by Mujib].”¹¹⁰ We may also agree with Khan that like Bhutto’s, Mujib’s failure to retain the support and trust of the “opinion-building elites” led to the tragic end of his life and regime. Most importantly, “within a nation-state any effort on the part of one major culture to dominate another major culture can create a type of political conflict which can only be resolved through violence.”¹¹¹ The hitherto unheard of “secularism” and “socialism” by the ordinary people, and the strong reservations about these ideologies by Islamic clerics and their millions of adherents in Bangladesh created the clash of cultures which led to the violent overthrow of the Mujib regime. No wonder, the successive regimes—from the short-lived Mushtaque regime to Zia, Ershad, Khaleda and even the Awami League regime under Hasina—have been playing the Islamic Card by discarding the “secularism” and “socialism” cards altogether for legitimacy. In hindsight is evident that Mujib simply failed to understand the importance of nurturing the Islamic identity of the vast majority of the population in the country, around 90 per cent of them are Muslim, and most of them have strong reservations for “secularism” and “socialism.” Last but not least, as Zillur Khan has agreed with the Weberian contention that charismatic leadership is short-lived, charisma alone does not keep someone to power for a long time.¹¹²

Last but not least, as Mujib antagonized Major Dalim—and many army officers and ordinary soldiers—by dismissing him along with twenty-one other officers, including Majors Nur and Huda, (who later killed Mujib) from the Army, after he had complained to Mujib himself about the maltreatment of himself and his wife by Awami League MP Ghazi Gholam Mustafa, instead of taking any action against Mustafa, Mujib’s unexplainable leniency to another Awami leader whom one army officer had arrested for his alleged rape and murder of the rape victim, her husband and a cab driver in 1973. According to Anthony Mascarenhas, Colonel Farooq (the mastermind of Mujib assassination) told him the incident of rape and triple murder by Muzammil Haque, President of the Tongi Awami League (in the north of Dhaka city) at Tongi, who had been arrested by Major Nasser for his crime. Haque allegedly offered a hefty bribe to the Major for his release and told the Major: “Don’t make it a public affair. You

will anyway have to let me go, either today or tomorrow. So why not take the money and forget about it!” The Major instead took him to the police and according to Colonel Farooq “they were all astonished a few days later to find that Muzammil had been released on Sheikh Mujib’s direct intervention.” For Farooq, this the incident was his last straw. He decided to kill Mujib. “We decided he must go,” he told Mascarenhas.¹¹³ Mujib’s cronyism was very intense and irrational, and it defied all norms of justice and the principles of the rule of law. One may cite another example in this regard. Mujib knew about Kader Siddiqi’s extra-judicial barbaric killing of four “Biharis” at Dhaka Stadium on 18 December 1971. Despite this, he told Siddiqi while he was formally surrendering arms at the feet of the Patriarch in early 1972: “Kader, you killed four people. Even if you had killed 400, I wouldn’t have taken any action against you.”¹¹⁴ Another Mujib protégé was labour leader Abdul Mannan, who was the chief of the dreadful Lal Bahini (or the Red Brigade, an Awami vigilante outfit) which arrested, tortured, expropriated and even killed victims with total impunity under Mujib’s tutelage.¹¹⁵ Among so many Awami thugs and vigilante killers, Mujib gave indulgence to and protected out of harm’s way during his short rule, Gazi Gholam Mustafa, Kader Siddiqi, Muzammil Haque and Abdul Mannan (of Lal Bahini) were the most prominent ones. His nephews, sons, and close and distant relatives represented another class of people above the law of the land. In short, Mujib’s indulgence in and protection of ruling-party crooks like Ghazi Gholam Mustafa, Muzammil Haque, Kader Siddiqi and Abdul Mannan not only cost his life and tarnished his image, but unfortunately, their legacies also seem to be everlasting! Interestingly, as of early 2020, while Muzammil is a minister in Hasina’s cabinet, Siddiqi is a wealthy politician and powerbroker.

To conclude, one may agree with Archer Blood, the US Consul General in Dhaka in 1971, who approvingly cites what Alamgir Rahman—one of Mujib advisers—told him about Mujib: “It is not Mujib’s style to fully confide in anyone Very rarely under this strict ‘need to know’ system did one adviser know what another was doing He [Mujib] manages to keep everyone happy by following a modus operandi whereby he looks at one person, talks to another, and pats a third on the back, with result that each feels he is receiving a share of the attention.”¹¹⁶ Blood, who was very sympathetic to the cause of Bangladesh, assessed Mujib, Awami League, Students’ League and the system he ran quite objectively:

- Mujib was “pro-Western,” “pro-USSR, not pro-China,” and “India friendly,” and authoritarian by nature.
- His method of “confiding wholly in no one but effectively using everyone” would not work in the long run. “Somehow the system works. Without him, it would rapidly disintegrate.”
- The Awami League was committed to parliamentary democracy but due to “Mujib’s authoritarian ways” and his party’s “fuzzy socialism” and also “due to the shortage of Bengali managerial talent” his administration would be a destructive one.
- Mujib’s method “to keep everyone happy” would be disastrous at the end of the day.
- “It appears that the Sheikh acts mainly from instinct rather than from advice.”
- Blood has no kind words for the economist Rehman Sobhan either. “Sobhan reportedly gained favour with Mujib by outspoken comments on the interwing disparity and advocacy of a ‘two economies’ [for the two wings of Pakistan] theory,” Blood surmises. He also believes those who contend that “his [Sobhan’s] entrée into upper echelons of the AL is constrained by his well-known opportunism and by allegations that he is more destructive than constructive, etc.” And that “Sobhan is the AL’s ‘socialist window dressing’, a token display of a socialist theoretical economist close to the party.”
- “Mujib is less a visionary than shrewd, pragmatic political animal,” who was suspicious of intellectuals, would not be an efficient administrator.
- Last but not least, Blood believes that “actual and potential differences within the AL on economic ideology and distinctions regarding degrees of Bengali nationalist militancy” and the “militant minority” belonging to the Students’ League who favoured secession of East Pakistan would be a big problem for Mujib and his party. He thinks, “a notoriously difficult group to placate, students post a dilemma for the AL by their radicalism.”¹¹⁷

Seemingly Mujib’s ambivalence and unsubstantiated claims about his proactive role in the Language Movement in February 1952 (while he was in Faridpur Jail, outside Dhaka); in the Agartala Conspiracy; in his “prearranging” sanctuary, arms and training of Bangladeshi freedom fighters by India; and his so-called Declaration of Independence on 26 March 1971 are impediments to any objective study of Bangladesh history

and politics. Moudud Ahmed, his aide and attorney at the Agartala Case, does not believe Mujib created the group involved in the Agartala Conspiracy to liberate East Bengal. “After independence, Mujib started making such and many other assertions only to cover the fact he did not take part in the independence war and did not clearly declare independence,” asserts Moudud Ahmed. And, he further adds: “Mujib once told me after the independence that he even had a clandestine office in New Delhi for several years. This also had no truth in it. Every Awami League leader I talked to, including Tajuddin, denied this propaganda as to be true.”¹¹⁸

Now, decades after the brutal killing of Mujib and most of his family members, and the overthrow of his Soviet-style one-party rule in Bangladesh in 1975, one might wonder why he is still so relevant to understand what went wrong with the country! He is still relevant because he not only retained the undemocratic and inegalitarian political culture of the Pakistani ruling elites—which has been one of the worst hangovers from British colonial rule—but also introduced premodern rural, peasant and “feudal” elements in the body politic of Bangladesh, which Bangladesh has indigenized at every level of society. In sum, the newly independent polity of Bangladesh under his and all the successive regimes’ supervision have failed to discard the authoritarian, elitist and colonial elements from the political culture of the country. Mujib nurtured autocracy. And, although autocracy in any name or form is bad for the people who live under one, yet autocracy in the name of democracy and/or national socialism is even worse. And Mujib’s legacy is “democratic dictatorship,” which most of his successors so far have nurtured quite successfully. Already a cult of Mujib has been nurtured in Bangladesh, where casting any aspersions to his character is a criminal offence. Conversely, Mujib’s deification has also further divided and polarized the nation between pro-and anti-Mujib adherents. In sum, not only Mujib divided his nation soon after assuming power but also, after his death, the nation is divided between his ardent admirers and bitter critics.

While Zillur Khan is sympathetic to Mujib’s drawbacks, William Milam is harsh, but straight forward, and objective about what Mujib was seriously lacking. He thinks that charismatic leaders of independence movements often lack organizational skills and inclusivist policies to bring people together, and “Mujib, the epitome of charisma, was a good example

Mujib's personal skill set seemed woefully short of the essential mental agility and toughness needed by a leader to mould a new country." He also blames Mujib for dividing the Army and bureaucracy between "freedom fighters," "repatriates" (from Pakistan), and those who served the Pakistani occupation regime in Bangladesh during the Liberation War. And, among other follies of Mujib's administration, William Milam points out the nationalization of industries and financial institutions in the name of socialism as an "administrative burden impossibly on an already weak government." It took Bangladesh to the threshold of disaster through inefficiency and corruption. He is also critical of Mujib for "blatantly and unnecessarily rigging the polls [in 1973]," and introducing the one-party dictatorship in 1975. He thinks Mujib not only dies unlamented, as popular esteem for him "had fallen so low by then that few lamented this brutal act, but its legacy continues to haunt Bangladesh politics." That is, his brutal death has remained another divisive factor to keep the country divided for an indefinite period.¹¹⁹ Only unflinching support of the military and bureaucracy (which Mujib lost), can keep authoritarian rulers in power for a long time. Nasser, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi and the three successive Kims in North Korea are glaring examples in this regard.

In sum, Lawrence Ziring has aptly assessed Mujib, who was a hero of a Greek tragedy:

Mujib was unprepared for the enormous responsibilities of leading ... had come to public notice because of his fighting abilities ... was the perfect demagogue Mujib's instincts guided his behaviour, they also stunted his intellectual growth For all his bravado, Mujib was a frightened man Mujib espoused libertarian goals, but democratic principles and procedures made him very uncomfortable After the tumultuous reception on arriving at Dhaka airport, Mujib was convinced that he was Bangladesh itself was convinced he could prevail without the organization, indeed was impeded by it ... was also convinced that the country required authoritative decisions While Mujib lived the fantasy of being Bangladesh, he did not fathom the reality that he was really the Awami League Mujib who instead of running an administration, presided over something akin to a court Mujib was in his own way a generous, kind and considerate man who wished to do well

even if it only meant verbalizing a commitment that he knew could never be kept Mujib was a fine Bangabandhu but a poor prime minister.¹²⁰

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5. Trial and Error, Hope and Despair: Bangladesh Under Zia and Ershad, 1975– 1990

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Probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities.

—Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 24, cited in Angela Partington (ed), *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996, p. 25

Mass politics occurs when large numbers of people engage in political activity outside of the procedures and rules instituted by a society to govern political action. Mass politics in a democratic society, therefore, is anti-democratic, since it contravenes the constitutional order Bureaucracy poses the strongest threat to social pluralism and liberal democracy.

—William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society*, Third Edition, The Free Press, New York 1963

Keywords Gen. Zia – Gen. Ershad – Gen. Manzur – Col. Taher – Moudud Ahmed – BNP – Justice Sattar – Awami League – Bhashani – Jatiya Party – Brig. Khaled Musharraf

Bangladesh Under Ziaur Rahman: A New Beginning Towards Good Governance, 1975–1981

The August coup of 1975, which killed Mujib and most of his family members and toppled his one-party rule, was as inevitable as monsoon rain after weeks of sweltering heat in Bangladesh. Mujib's one-party dictatorship—his “personal dictatorship ... to convert the country into a personal fiefdom for himself and his family members,” as Lawrence Ziring¹ puts it—precipitated the thunderstorm. And, we know Mujib's switching-over to a one-party dictatorship was not in reaction to some national emergency but in accordance with his preference for dictatorship to democracy or rule by a constitution, which he publicly denounced as a colonial legacy.² Now, the proliferation of so many conspiracy theories about who killed Mujib and why does not help us resolve the problem. One is not sure if Mujib's successor Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed or the retired and serving majors who actually staged the coup and killed Mujib and his family members with “tacit support” of General Ziaur Rahman were the key players, or the US administration played the decisive role in the coup! As Ziring argues, “the majors and possibly Mushtaque too were principals in these epoch-making events, but not the key players,” and “the conspiracy to destroy the *Bangabandhu* ... was not only more widespread, *it also had a higher cast of players* [emphasis added].”³ Whether Mushtaque had plotted the overthrow of the Mujib regime a year before it happened, and if the US embassy in Dhaka knew about it six months earlier, as Lifshultz suggests,⁴ one finds Ziring more convincing, that the coup of August 1975 was “internally generated,” not orchestrated by America.⁵ One may further agree with Ziring that Majors Farook and Rashid “did not have the capacity to reward Zia,” as Mushtaque was the lynchpin in the whole plot, and held the mantle of political power after the coup. Nevertheless, although not a co-conspirator to overthrow Mujib, Zia was definitely the main beneficiary of the coup.⁶

The day after the coup, the four newspapers which had survived the proscription order by the Mujib government made anti-BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League) headlines. Two headlines of a Bengali daily read: “People Are Heaving a Sigh of Relief,” and “Maulana Bhashani Lends Support to Moshtaque Government.”⁷ Soon after assuming power as the President of Bangladesh, Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed took some drastic measures to undo the radical changes brought about by the one-party rule under Mujib. He formally declared the end of BAKSAL rule

and promised the restoration of multi-party democracy. Most importantly, on 26 September 1975, through a presidential ordinance, he granted indemnity to the assassins of Mujib and his associates. The Indemnity Ordinance implied no courts in the country would be ever allowed to prosecute Mujib's assassins. His government arrested six ministers of Mujib's cabinet, ten MPs, four bureaucrats and several businessmen on different charges of corruption and misconduct. He made a list of thirty-six corrupt military officers. He also released political detainees, including Mashiur Rahman Jadu Mia and Oli Ahad. He made General Osmani the military adviser to the President and appointed General Ziaur Rahman as the new Army Chief. He also returned the ownership of two Bengali dailies, *Ittefaq* and *Sangbad*, to the original owners. What is very noteworthy is that in Post-Liberation Bangladesh, Muslim Bengalis, who had tremendous misgivings about the Mujib government's "secular" and "socialist" policies, welcomed the end of his regime. Following the end of the Mujib regime, Mushtaque played the Islamic card to legitimize his rule. His assassins and their supporters also re-emphasized Islam and "swiftly pushed the national slogan of Jai Bangla [Victory to Bengal] aside and reverted to the old zindabad slogan," which was "a throwback to the erstwhile Pakistan Zindabad [long live Pakistan]," observes a pro-Awami League columnist, Syed Badrul Ahsan.⁸ He blames Maulana Bhashani, who had been an ardent champion of socialism and freedom, as soon after the Liberation, he "went for a total reversal of his political ideology ... disseminating the idea of what he termed Muslim Bangla."⁹

It is noteworthy, the army officers and troops who toppled the Mujib regime had been freedom fighters—some highly decorated ones—in the Liberation War. As discussed earlier, Bangladesh under Mujib was going through a very turbulent and uncertain phase of its history. Being a symbol of poverty and bad governance, the country was also too close to India and the Soviet Union for comfort for the bulk of the Muslim population in the country. While the bulk of the population was leaning towards Islam—both spiritual and political—out of frustration and in quest of an alternative political ideology, their government was "secular" and "socialist," in the distorted sense of the expressions. So much so that Indian journalist Basant Chatterjee's eyewitness accounts of Bangladesh in 1973 revealed that Islam was the cornerstone of Bangladeshi identity, and the country had virtually become "Muslim Bengal."¹⁰

As Mujib was losing his popularity in geometric progression during 1972–1975, his brutal assassination along with most family members did not move the bulk of the Bangladeshis at all, at least not during the first two decades following the August coup of 1975. Not only Mujib's very close associates took the reins of the government, but soon after Mujib's assassination, Awami League stalwart Abdul Malek Ukil, who was the speaker of the parliament, led a parliamentary delegation to London to seek British support for the Mushtaque government. He even told a journalist at the Heathrow Airport who asked for his opinion about Mujib's killing: "The country has been relieved of the Pharaoh!" Another senior Awami League leader, Mohiuddin Ahmed, went to Moscow to seek Soviet support for the new regime.¹¹ Maulana Bhashani, who welcomed Mujib at his residence in March 1975—apparently, in approval of Mujib's one-party rule—soon after his assassination—also supported the Mushtaque regime.¹² Seemingly, personal loyalty and durable commitment to any ideology among Bangladeshi politicians, intellectuals, beneficiaries of powerful people and the hoi polloi has been as elusive as anything.

Mujib's death was followed by several coups and counter-coups, and finally, General Ziaur Rahman became the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA), and eventually President of Bangladesh. The cleavage within the Army, between Zia having close links with the coup makers—and Brigadier Khaled Musharraf—"possibly" in collusion with the Awami League—was widened by early November 1975. However, thanks to the anti-Awami League sentiment of the people and the bulk of the armed forces (anti-Awami League was almost synonymous with anti-India) the pro-Zia elements in the Army successfully crushed the four-day-old coup by Musharraf on 7 November. Troops killed the counter-coup leaders, including Musharraf, and Zia virtually became the new ruler of Bangladesh, under the titular President Sayem, who had been appointed by Musharraf on 4 November.¹³ Soon Zia crushed the pseudo-Leftist JSD (National Socialist Party), which was an offshoot of the Mujib Bahini, an Indian-trained outfit of freedom fighters, who soon after the Liberation had been championing ultra-leftist ideology, and publicly went against the Mujib government.¹⁴ According to Major General (ret) Muhammad Ibrahim, after Brigadier Khaled Musharraf staged a coup on 3 November the Bangladesh Army was completely polarized between pro-Musharraf and pro-Zia groups. Meanwhile, thanks to the surreptitious activities by retired Colonel Taher

and pro-JSD elements in the Army who had organized an illicit and destructive group called *Gopon Shainik Sangstha* (a soldiers' clandestine organization) challenged and defeated the Khaled Musharraf group. Khaled got killed at the hands of rebel soldiers on 7 November 1975. The secret group among the Army was mostly repatriated troops and from non-combatant units like Signals and Ordnance. Later this group made nineteen coup attempts against Zia, who crushed them and executed many rebel soldiers and officers. Ibrahim believes Zia saved the Army and Bangladesh, with courage and integrity. Ibrahim also criticizes the Mujib government's undue interference in the Army's action against Awami League leaders, many of whom were arrested as smugglers.¹⁵ After the elimination of the ambitious Brigadier Musharraf in November 1975, and the radical pro-JSD elements in the armed forces, especially their leader Colonel (retd.) Taher's execution by a military tribunal in 1976 (Taher wanted to stage a socialist revolution with "people's armed forces") Zia emerged as the de facto ruler of Bangladesh.

However, neither Zia nor Bangladesh was free during late September to early October of 1977, two major disturbances stirred up by sections of the Army and Air Force posed security threats to the Zia administration and the country, as a whole. The August '75 coup leader Major (retd.) Farooq went to his "own" cavalry unit at Bogra to mobilize the support of troops against Zia. Farooq managed to mobilize troops in some infantry units as well. He wanted to float his own political party in Bangladesh, which Zia was not in favour of. No sooner had Zia tackled the situation at Bogra than some air force troops revolted in Dhaka and killed several air force officers on 2 October 1977. Zia ruthlessly crushed the rebellion and executed hundreds of rebels and their ring leaders. Ironically, these actions earned Zia a bad name as "ruthless" and even "ungrateful!" To Mascarenhas—who praises Ershad, the corrupt and ruthless military dictator a lot—"No general in the history of the subcontinent massacred his own troops the way Zia did after the aborted coup of 2nd October 1977." Then again, he mentions that Zia was also "plagued by 20 mutinies, attempted coups and assassination attempts" during his five-and-a-half-year rule.¹⁶ Zia substantially increased expenditures for the armed forces as well as on economic development, especially agriculture. He faced twenty-six attempted coups against his regime, and his armed forces were thoroughly divided, at least into four distinct groups: (a) freedom fighters, (b) repatriated from Pakistan, (c)

Islam-oriented and (d) radical “Leftist”/extremist group under JSD’s Colonel Taher and others. The above groups were again subdivided into conservative, moderate and radical factions. Thus, he had to take drastic action against the radical/extremist group members. He had to execute “thousands of officers and men to death.” Ziring thinks: “Like Shakespeare’s Macbeth ... Zia became so steeped in blood, that going forward was no more difficult than retreating, and retreating meant yielding.”¹⁷ In short, Zia tried to maintain a balance between the politically ambitious military officers—who also wanted to have a large portion of the economic pie, disproportionate to their number and qualifications—and the politically ambitious civilians, who did not want to lose their economic interests either. On the one hand, he appeased the August ’75 coup leaders, Farooq, Rashid, Dalim and others by giving lucrative diplomatic positions abroad to most of them, on the other, he formed a political party, held parliamentary and presidential elections to introduce multi-party democracy and the predominance of civil administration. Meanwhile, Zia had also successfully overpowered the Indian-backed cross border insurgents under freedom fighter-cum-war criminal Kader Siddiqi in 1977. Soon after the overthrow of the Mujib regime, Siddiqi and his men (ardent Mujib loyalists) went to India, and the Indira Gandhi administration gave them sanctuary and arms to create disturbances across the Indo-Bangladesh border. Siddiqi’s men killed many Bangladeshi soldiers at the northern border during the eighteen-month confrontation until the emergence of Morarji Desai, as the new Prime Minister of India in March 1977. Meanwhile, India had also provided sanctuary and arms to the Chakma separatist *Shanti Bahini* militia in India. Although Siddiqi’s rebel group fizzled out in 1977, the *Shanti Bahini* insurgency continued till 1997. However, Zia’s uncompromising efforts kept the Chakma insurgents at bay.

After the end of direct military rule in February 1979, Ziaur Rahman emerged as a civilian President. William Milam is among many others who consider his politics of hope and transition, “a short-lived but fecund era” of growth and relative abundance in Bangladesh. Zia struggled and contained the politically ambitious military by establishing a semblance of civilian rule and democracy. He used the bureaucrats to the full, unlike Mujib, to restore discipline and generate growth. His Fifth Amendment ensured indemnity to all martial law regulations declared from 15 August 1975 to January 1979. Sharing waters of the Ganges with India emerged as a big

issue in 1976. Bangladeshis were against the Farakka Barrage across the river. Maulana Bhashani was a big champion of this cause. The Morarji Desai government in India was more lenient (1977–1980), but the re-emergence of Indira Gandhi to power in 1980 turned the table again, against Bangladesh. Zia also faced around twenty coups by rebellious, leftist and anarchist soldiers, and was killed in one in 1981. Zia withdrew martial law and made the parliament sovereign. In February 1979 parliamentary elections, the newly formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Zia got 207 out of 300 seats in the parliament. Bangladesh during the two years of Zia's civilian rule (February 1979–May 1981) was democratic. And, as Milam asserts “hope for democracy dies with him.”¹⁸

Although marginalized by Mujib, superseded by his junior, Major General Safiullah—with no known military feats, unlike Zia's, who was also a decorated officer in Pakistan Army for his heroic performance in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War—Zia's ascendancy to power was meteoric. Soon after the overthrow of the Mujib regime, Mushtaque made him the Chief of the Army Staff in August 1975. He not only lifted bans imposed on Islam-oriented political parties and parties like the Muslim League, which opposed the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, but he also allowed the revival of the Awami League, which Mujib had formally proscribed in 1975, through the Political Parties Regulation order on 28 July 1976.¹⁹ On 29 November 1976, President Sayem could no longer resist Zia's pressure to relinquish the position of the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA). Zia as the CMLA became the de facto ruler of the country, as under martial law, the CMLA's proclamations were more binding than the Constitution. The parliament was compliant and the President was just a figurehead. Soon after becoming the Chief Martial Law Administrator started the civilianization process by withdrawing martial law, holding parliamentary and presidential elections. On 21 April 1977, Zia asked ailing and old President Sayem to step down, which he did, and handed over the office of the President to Zia. On 30 May 1977, Zia held a country-wide referendum on the question “Do you have confidence in President Major General Ziaur Rahman and the policies and programmes enunciated by him?” to confirm his presidency. He got more than 98.88 per cent “yes votes.”²⁰ Zia's close associate and Director of the DGFI (military intelligence) Major General Mohabbat Jan Chowdhury told this writer that the poll figure (98.88 per cent) had been “unnecessarily” inflated by some people in the Zia

administration.²¹ Soon after the referendum, Zia wanted a proper mandate from the people. He formed a political alliance of “like-minded” people from the Right, Left and Centre who believed in his “Bangladeshi nationalism.” The alliance—not a full-fledged political party—the Nationalist Democratic Group (JAGODOL), came into being with his blessings on 23 February 1978. Meanwhile, he had publicly affirmed that he would make “politics difficult” for traditional politicians. He wanted a “rural-based” and “people-oriented” nationalist party.

Eight weeks after the formation of the JAGODOL, Zia declared that the presidential election would be held on 3 June 1978. His JAGODOL formed electoral alliances with the National Awami Party (Bhashani Group), Bangladesh Muslim League, United People’s Party and some smaller political parties. Zia’s main rival in the presidential election was General (retd.) M.A.G. Osmani (who was the Commander-in-Chief of the Freedom Fighters in 1971). Osmani was the candidate of the joint front comprised of the Awami League and some like-minded parties. While Zia won the election by capturing more than 76 per cent of the cast votes, Osmani managed to get only 21 per cent. Not long after winning the presidential election, Zia publicly announced on 1 September 1978 the formation of a broad-based political party called the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with a wide-ranging socio-economic manifesto based on his Nineteen-Point Programme.²² He brought about major constitutional changes and the change in the national identity. He restored law and order, revived political parties and political activities, and allowed the newspapers, which had been proscribed by Mujib in 1975.

After winning the presidential election, Zia held the parliamentary elections on 27 January 1979. Prior to the elections, he resigned from the Army but remained the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces as President of the Republic. Thirty-one political parties, including the newly created BNP, Awami League (AL), Muslim League (ML) Islamic Democratic League (IDL), JSD and others contested the parliamentary elections. While the BNP won 207 seats out of the total 300, the AL got 39, ML-IDL Alliance 20, JSD 8 and the remaining seats by 16 Independents and others. While the BNP secured 41.17 per cent of the cast votes, the AL managed to get only 24.56 per cent.²³

The ascendancy of Zia to the presidency of the country and the emergence of the BNP signalled some fundamental changes in the overall

socio-economic conditions, popular and political culture, and the overall politics of Bangladesh. Bangladesh under Zia got rid of cheap and hyperbolic populism, unbridled corruption and drainage of national wealth in the name of socialism, political cronyism, favouritism and nepotism, dominance of the Sheikh family in the state affairs at the micro and macro levels, unofficial impunity granted to Mujib's family members—especially his sons, Kamal and Jamal—and to members/supporters of the Awami League and its affiliate organizations, and the promotion of Indian culture in Bangladesh in the name of secularism and at the cost of Islamic values and symbols. Most importantly, the end of the Mujib era brought significant changes in the foreign policy of the country. The US and the West in general, the Muslim World and China, in particular, came closer to Bangladesh, diplomatically and economically. Zia encouraging private investment, raising the ceiling of investment from Tk 30 million to Tk 100 million, initiated the de-nationalization of industries and financial institutions. Despite the aid flow from the OECD donors and higher rates of money supply and bank credit Zia was able to sustain low inflation and higher annual GDP growth of around 6 per cent.²⁴ His grow-more-food policy also paid rich dividends.

There were significant qualitative differences between the AL and BNP governments, respectively under Mujib and Zia. While Mujib's cabinet ministers/advisers, AL executive committee members and MPs had been not so qualified or experienced as administrators, academics, journalists or technocrats—they overwhelmingly represented rural/small town people, representing the middle and lower-middle classes, with the mediocre calibre and academic qualifications, BNP's executive committee members, cabinet members/advisers and MPs were highly educated professionals, lawyers, technocrats, doctors, engineers, retired bureaucrats, diplomats and military officers. Out of Zia's seventeen cabinet members/advisers, three were retired bureaucrats, three retired military officers, two veteran politicians, four educationists, one lawyer and four technocrats (engineers, doctors, accountants).²⁵ The occupational background of the members of the BNP executive committee in 1981 (for example) was also very impressive. Out of the total 170 members, 57 were businessmen, 53 professionals, 28 agriculturists (rich peasants and petty landlords), 20 teachers, 11 retired bureaucrats, 2 trade unionists and 7 others. And, more than 70 per cent of MPs from the BNP came from the upper echelons of society, in wealth and

education. Interestingly, while more than 33 per cent of BNP MPs had previously belonged to the liberal Islam-oriented parties, such as the Muslim League and IDL, 13.4 per cent had previous affiliation to the AL, 22.9 per cent had links with pro-Chinese Leftist organizations 30.1 per cent had no previous affiliation to any political party.²⁶

Zia's socio-economic, political, and cultural policies reflected the socio-economic, cultural and political backgrounds of the majority members of the BNP's executive committee, Zia's cabinet and MPs from the ruling party. As mentioned earlier, he dropped the corrupt and inefficient "Socialism" and lopsided "Secularism," which, being hyperbolic and symbolic, had turned the Mujib government dysfunctional, and the country a famine-stricken "basket case." Zia introduced a market economy and democracy, although he also stressed the role of the armed forces as the defenders of national sovereignty and thus ensured some extra privileges to them. Nevertheless, Zia's rule was a big departure from Mujib's one-party Soviet-style "socialist" rule. He also promoted Islamic values and identity as integral to the national identity of Bangladesh. His growth and development strategy, and his rural development projects, and women's empowerment programmes (he ensured 10 per cent or thirty reserved seats for women in the parliament, in addition to the 300 directly elected by the people) drew the attention of the UN, international donors and development agencies, including the World Bank and IMF. Despite his government's "bias" towards promoting *jotedari* (rich peasant/landlord) interests in the countryside;²⁷ his national, development, rural and women's empowerment policies; the promotion of liberal democracy and market economy; freedom of expression and the rule of law, he was definitely the most statesman-like, honest, patriotic, pragmatic, innovative and efficient ruler that Bangladesh has had in the last fifty years since 1971. No wonder, despite Mujib's charisma, due to his ambivalence about the separation of East Pakistan from the state of Pakistan, his false claim about making the declaration of independence of Bangladesh on 26 March 1971, and above all, his corrupt, inefficient and ruthless rule, Zia's image outshines Mujib's as that of a real hero of Bangladesh. His declaration of independence on 27 March 1971 on behalf of Mujib, while the latter had surrendered to the Pakistan Army, inspired Bengalis most, and gave them a sense of direction. Zia was definitely one of the founding fathers of Bangladesh, along with Mujib, Tajuddin, Osmani and others.

Zia was not only the first prominent person to declare Independence, a brave freedom fighter and an able and honest administrator, but he also gave the nation of Bangladesh a new identity. His government introduced “Bangladeshi” as the new national identity of the people by removing the misleading “Bengali,” which paradoxically is the linguistic identity of all Bengalis within and beyond Bangladesh. It is, however, unbelievable but true that Mujib’s followers—as of today—believe their national identity is “Bengali,” not “Bangladeshi!” To put this hypothetically, it is as absurd as the German-speaking Austrians affirming their national identity as “German!” Now, was the adoption of “Bangladeshi” as a national identity by supplanting “Bengali” purely a substitution for the linguistic identity of the people by the territorial one? It is a tricky question! Affirming “Bangladeshi” as the national identity of the people of Bangladesh makes sense, as it is an inclusive policy to include all ethnonational and linguistic groups as equal citizens of the country. As some Bangladeshi scholars have argued, supporters of the Zia government viewed the “Bangladeshi” identity as “a line of distinction between the people of Bangladesh and the ethnic Bengalis of West Bengal, and to project the image of Bangladesh as a distinctive Muslim nation.”²⁸ Zia also removed “Secularism” and “Socialism” from the four-pronged State Ideology as they had existed under the Mujib administration. “Absolute Faith in Allah” and “Economic and Social Justice” replaced “Secularism” and “Socialism,” respectively. His government also added “*Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim*” (In the Name of Allah, the Beneficient, the Merciful) in Arabic at the beginning of the Constitution of Bangladesh, to highlight the Islamic or Muslim identity of the bulk of the population.²⁹ One may, however, agree with Gholam Kabir, “With the resurfacing of Islamic symbols and images under Zia, the integration of the minorities [non-Muslims] has been halted.”³⁰ It is, however, difficult to agree with him, “With the rise of Bengali nationalism based on linguistic identity, the Hindu community was embraced by the Bengali Muslims as part of their nation.”³¹

Zia’s assassination on 30 May 1981, when he was only forty-five and before the end of the first democratically elected term of his presidency and parliament was a tragedy for Bangladesh. Seemingly, the country has not yet recovered from this trauma. His death was followed by almost a decade-long of one of the most corrupt and degenerative military and quasi-civilian rule under General Ershad. There are multiple circumstantial pieces of

evidence to incriminate General Ershad in the assassination of Ziaur Rahman. Seemingly, the killing of Zia at Ershad's behest was the prelude to his illegitimate overthrow of Zia's political successor, the democratically elected President Abdus Sattar, on 24 March 1982.

Now, who killed Zia and why are more important than how his killers succeeded in achieving their goal. It is evident that both General Ershad and General Manzur, the Army Chief and the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) under President Zia, respectively, were instrumental in the killing of Zia. The former also overthrew the system of governance Zia had introduced to ensure civilian predominance in the overall administration of the country. Interestingly, although installed to power following the third military takeover of the country in one year, on 7 November 1975 (the first two took place on 15 August and 3 November) as a martial law administrator, Zia was far more democratic than all the civil and military rulers Bangladesh have had since its Liberation. His fast civilianization process was his nemesis.

It appears that military officers, in general, were unhappy with Zia's rapid civilianization programme. Seemingly, his rewarding the medium and top brasses of the armed forces (trained in Pakistan, nurturing the dream of playing a dominant role in politics) by doling out diplomatic, police and administrative positions did not make them happy. In January 1981, the Army Chief General Ershad wrote a piece in the *Bangladesh Army Journal*, where he wanted participatory role for the Army "in the collective effort of the nation." Mahmud Ali has aptly appraised this as "implicit rejection of the civil-military divide effected by Zia appeared to reflect an area consensus in the officers' corps."³² Apparently, the immediate cause of the abortive coup by Manzur that killed Zia was the latter's decision to remove General Abul Manzur from his command position of the Chittagong-based 24th Infantry Division and transfer him to Dhaka as the Commandant of the Bangladesh Staff College days before his killing. Ziring believes that while Zia appointed repatriated General Ershad as his deputy-chief of the Army, not freedom fighter Manzur, whom he did not trust as he had been a close friend of the executed Colonel Taher, "Manzoor's desire to replace Zia was now an obsession!" Manzur also believed in the elimination of Ershad and other repatriated senior officers, Ziring surmises. He also thinks the mutual mistrust between Zia and Manzur was instrumental in the former's decision to remove the latter from the command position of the 24th Division, and

the latter's decision to eliminate Zia.³³ So far so good! However, appraisals pinpointing Manzur as the only general behind the coup and Zia's killing out of sheer anger or miscalculation look too pedestrian to comment on! It is difficult to agree with Ziring that "Manzur had a distorted picture of his chances of pulling off the coup against Zia." And, that "He did not fully fathom the high regard in which Zia was held by his own forces or the larger public."³⁴ However, several retired army officers, including a general, told this author that Ershad, not Manzur, wanted to kill Zia and that Ershad later got Manzur killed. According to Major General (retd.) Syed Ibrahim: "Ershad gave green signal to Lt Col Mati and Lt Col Mahbub [Manzoor's nephew] NOT to Gen Manzur [to kill Zia]. Manzur did not want that Zia is killed. Ershad got ZIA killed, Ershad got Manzur killed."³⁵ Shariful Haque Dalim reveals something very interesting. He blames Ershad for playing a dubious game. He poisoned Zia against Manzur and simultaneously assured Manzur of his support in the event of his staging an anti-Zia coup. Dalim also believes that Ershad was keen on implementing the Indian intelligence agency "RAW's plan," which was the removal of Zia from power!³⁶

Then again, Ziring has rightly tossed his above arguments up and finds out a more convincing argument; that is, Manzur, besides being angry with Zia (determined to kill him), possibly "did not act in isolation, but was in fact part of a larger conspiracy."³⁷ Did Ershad send one Captain Emdad to Chittagong, soon after the killing of Zia, who later is said to have killed Manzur with his handgun, in police custody? Why would Ershad get Manzur "killed" had he not been a co-conspirator of the coup? We do not have any concrete answers to these questions, but only some circumstantial pieces of evidence and arguments to incriminate Ershad in the abortive coup. One may take Mahmud Ali's argument with a pinch of salt that Manzur failed to secure the loyalty of his troops after some officers had gunned down Zia, which may have been a product of "the fear created by the executions which followed the October 1977 mutiny!"³⁸ One wonders, why would a smart and bright general like Manzur "fail" to understand the implications of a coup at Chittagong—let alone, the killing of Zia—while Dhaka would remain "unconquered!" The junior officers, Lt. Col. Matiur Rahman and Lt. Col. Mehboobur Rahman (Manzur's nephew), and fourteen

others who killed Zia had to do the killing themselves, as soldiers would not do it, argues Mascarenhas.³⁹

Some fingers have been raised at Indira Gandhi who did not relish seeing Bangladesh being run by someone like Zia having close ties with China and Pakistan. India's RAW masterminded the Zia assassination in collusion with Hasina and Ershad so goes one theory.⁴⁰ Lawrence Lifschultz believes, blaming Manzur for the coup, as Ershad did soon after the killing of Zia, "had all the characteristics of a classic 'False Flag' operation." Lifschultz's investigative writing based on his long interviews with late General Moin Choudhury (freedom fighter and diplomat) and testimonies of several retired Bangladeshi civil and military officers and troops who were in Chittagong on that fateful night on 30 May 1981 proves beyond any doubt that Ershad, not Manzur was the mastermind in the killing Zia and Manzur.⁴¹ It is noteworthy that after succeeding Zia, President Sattar formed an inquiry committee on the killing of Zia under the supervision of two supreme court and one district court judges, who submitted their report in September 1981. However, for some mysterious reasons, the report was never published. Mascarenhas believes that top BNP leaders did not want the innocuous report published, as they wanted to "make insidious rumours fly to besmirch the reputation of innocent men perceived as potential rivals for power."⁴²

Among other administrative reforms under Zia, the restructuring of local self-government institutions, empowerment of women, even in rural areas, and granting the independence of the judiciary are worth mentioning. In sum, he emphasized self-reliance and rural development through people's participation; "grow more food"; population control; administrative de-centralization; and the promotion of market economy.⁴³ Consequently, Bangladesh drew foreign direct investment (FDI); started sending Bangladeshi unskilled workers to the Middle East and North Africa. He also encouraged people to start garment factories in Bangladesh, which eventually ensured the inflow of a substantial amount of foreign currency, economic growth and development. Thanks to Zia's initiative, Bangladesh today has become self-sufficient in food, is the second-largest garment exporter and one of the major manpower exporters in the world. These initiatives were undertaken by Zia—with the help of technocrat ministers and advisers—and helped Bangladesh get rid of its unflattering image as an "international basket case." He re-introduced multi-party

democracy in Bangladesh. His rule may be summed up as one which more or less restored discipline in the disorderly and fractured armed forces. This, however, cost him dearly as some over-ambitious and disgruntled army officers eliminated him physically. As Zia empathized with peasants and ordinary masses to undertake irrigation projects through his canal digging operation (which he emulated from China) with grassroots participation, so did he introduce participatory village government (*gram sarkar*) and rural employment-generating projects. As Ziring aptly calls Zia “A People’s President,”⁴⁴ he was also a real visionary with regard to his domestic and foreign policies. In sum, he was diametrically opposite to Mujib as a ruler and leader. Bangladeshis also treated them differently while they were at the helm of the statecraft and after their tragic deaths.

Ershad Epitomized Corruption, Degeneration and Hedonism

After Zia’s assassination in May 1981, on 15 November, the acting President Abdus Sattar assumed the presidency with an overwhelming electoral victory, securing around 66 per cent of the vote. Sattar’s victory was a “vote to sustain the momentum of Zia’s reforms,” asserts Lawrence Ziring.⁴⁵ Zillur Rahman Khan believes that Sattar’s main opponent in the election, Kamal Hossain from the Awami League lost because “the country was not ready to return to the days of Mujibism.”⁴⁶ However, soon the Army Chief Lieut. General Ershad toppled the elected government of President Sattar on totally fabricated and flimsy ground. About four months before his military takeover in March 1982, on 28 November 1981, Ershad addressed the nation over radio and TV, demanding a role for the armed forces in running the administration of the country, on the ground of restoring the law-and-order situation. He insisted that the military had a major responsibility in the nation-building process. He wanted a National Security Council (NSC) to restore the law and order, run by the President and the three military chiefs. Soon, taking advantage of some BNP leaders’ willingness to support Ershad’s plea for the NSC with strong military presence, on 24 March 1982, Ershad dismissed the President, dissolved the parliament, suspended the Constitution and clamped martial law on the country.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that while Zia introduced good governance,

economic growth and political stability, Ershad signalled the beginning of rampant corruption, hedonism and degeneration of the entire polity of Bangladesh.

Now, we may agree with Moudud Ahmed (who served the Zia, Ershad and Khaleda governments) that the prevalent weak political institutions and the lack of any respect for democratic institutions in Bangladesh precipitated the military takeover by Ershad. Moudud Ahmed has rightly blamed both Mujib and Zia for neglecting the development of democratic institutions in the country. He blames some unscrupulous ministers in Zia's cabinet "most of whom Zia had planned to dismiss," and the Army for promoting the candidature of the elderly and indecisive Vice-President Abdus Sattar to succeed Zia. The reason was obvious! "They believed that he [Sattar] was old and weak and they would be able to influence him as and when the occasion demanded," Ahmed surmises.⁴⁸ He also believes that the rift between some old and young BNP leaders—those who had been pro-Pakistan, and those who had been pro-Bangladesh in 1971, respectively—fractured the party to such an extent that the former supported Sattar and the latter Khaleda Zia to be the successor of Ziaur Rahman. And that, Ershad sided with the old guards in the BNP and wanted Sattar to be the next President. Meanwhile, as mentioned above, Ershad had publicly demanded a role for the armed forces in running the state machinery. So much so that, in early October 1981 (around six weeks ahead of the presidential election), Ershad told the *Guardian* that "the army would take part in the administration of the country and after the election, the Constitution would be amended accordingly." These were ominously illegal assertions by the Army Chief, and Sattar was too incapable to understand their implications. Last but not least, as Ahmed has put it: "He [Sattar] did not understand why the army was so keen to see him elected."⁴⁹ So, seemingly, the weak and vacillating Sattar had sealed his fate by relying on his untrustworthy Army Chief and Machiavellian cabinet members. Soon Ershad invented a convenient excuse to justify his military takeover of the country, his apparent *raison d'être* being the arrest of one Imdu—a wanted criminal—from the official residence of one minister in the Sattar cabinet. His promised parliamentary elections took place in May 1986—not in a few months but after more than four years of the coup—and BNP, the largest political party in the country (floated by Ziaur Rahman) boycotted the polls, while the Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami and other minor parties took part

in the elections. And, martial law was withdrawn in November of the same year.⁵⁰

Ershad staged a bloodless military coup on 24 March 1982. This was followed by his public pledges to the nation that (a) he would never enter politics; he would put the administration and economy in order, and elections would be held to establish a “true democracy” in the country. Ershad further justified his coup as a “permanent solution” to prevent coups and killings as he would unify the sharply polarized officers and troops of the armed forces in the two rival camps of freedom fighters and repatriated ones.⁵¹ However, although the 7 November coup in 1975 was a justified one, that of Ershad could not be justified “because the situation was far different and nowhere near so threatening to public order or stability.” The *raisons d’être* for his military takeover, as he explained, were flimsy and ridiculous to justify one of the worst crimes committed against a budding democracy (imperfect and illiberal though) in Bangladesh. National security from political and social “indiscipline,” corruption, economic hard times, law-and-order problems and an insufficiency of food in the market were the flimsiest excuses Ershad gave to justify his coup. He also almost completely eliminated the independence of the judiciary. To appease the Islamic parties and ultra-conservative Muslims, in December 1982 he promised that the Constitution of the country would be based on Shariah, and Arabic (the language of the Qur’an) would be a part of the primary school curriculum. To curry favour of the industrialists and rich businessmen, he further liberalized the economy and de-nationalized some jute mills.⁵²

Ershad was a smooth operator, very intelligent and, above all, out of all the rulers Bangladesh has had since Liberation, possibly the most gifted in understanding the psyche of the nation. He knew almost everyone in Bangladesh has a price—man, woman, old and young. Very similar to most military dictators, Ershad tried to legitimize his autocracy through elections and the use of religion. In 1986, politicians like Awami League’s Sheikh Hasina and Jamaat-e-Islami’s Matiur Rahman Nizami, among others participated in the farcical elections. Interestingly, Ershad is said to have taken Hasina to a long drive and convinced her to take part in the 1986 parliamentary elections (which, days before, she had promised to boycott wholeheartedly). A Bangladeshi senior diplomat (a retired army officer) told this writer in Singapore that he had seen documentary evidence of

Ershad bribing Hasina to take part in the 1986 elections, to give his regime a stamp of legitimacy.⁵³

Shocking though but not surprising, professionals, intellectuals, businessmen, serving and retired civil and military bureaucrats joined the Ershad bandwagon. In 1988, he introduced Islam as the “State Religion” of the country, to counterpoise the political influence of Islamist parties, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami. Islam as the “State Religion” alienated some non-Muslims so much that soon after the insertion of this clause in the Constitution, renowned freedom fighter General C.R. Dutta and other Bengali non-Muslims formed the Hindu-Buddhist-Christian United Front, which has not yet accepted Islam as the “State Religion.” Interestingly, thanks to the overwhelming Bangladeshi Muslim support for Islam as the “State Religion,” no successive government since Ershad’s overthrow in 1990 has been able to drop this divisive and controversial clause from the Constitution.

One may name some important names who supported the regime and reaped rich dividends out of it. ASM Abdur Rab, who was a student leader at Dhaka University on the eve of the Liberation War, and who once opposed the not-so-democratic regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a JSD leader also legitimized the illegitimate Ershad regime by participating in the farcical parliamentary elections. In 1988, he became the leader of the opposition in the parliament. Witty Bangladeshis still remember him as Ershad’s “domesticated opposition leader” (*grihapalita birodhi dalaneta*)! Scores of prominent politicians joined Ershad’s cabinet and served him loyally. Such as: Ataur Rahman Khan, Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, Moudud Ahmed, Kazi Zafar Ahmed, Anwar Zahid, Barrister Anisul Islam Mahmud and Wahidul Haque, who was Professor of Economics at the University of Toronto. It is noteworthy that Ataur Rahman Khan (1905–1991)—a former Chief Minister of East Pakistan—until the day before he took oath as Ershad’s Prime Minister, had been leading an anti-Ershad political movement, the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Bangladesh. Interestingly, Moudud Ahmed and Kazi Zafar Ahmed were former cabinet ministers in the Zia administration. Both were handpicked by Ziaur Rahman in his cabinet. While the former was an associate of Mujib, the latter was a radical pro-Chinese communist. Like so many others, Ershad exposed Ataur Rahman Khan, Moudud Ahmed, Kazi Zafar

Ahmed as well, as dishonest political opportunists, with no commitment to any individual, political party or ideology.

Bangladesh witnessed economic growth, administrative reforms, the establishment of the world-famous Grameen Bank of Muhammad Yunus with state patronage, some positive steps towards partial flood control in the capital city. Unlike many dictators, Ershad allowed political parties and political activities tolerated most criticisms against his regime, the press was not totally gagged, unlike what happened during Mujib's Emergency (1975) and later under Sheikh Hasina's (virtual) one-party rule. However, he was equally ruthless. In February 1983, his police killed several Dhaka University students, demonstrating against his rule, by running over a police truck. His police killed several other students demonstrating against his regime, in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country. The brutal killing of one Noor Hossain, a twenty-six-year-old school dropout, by Ershad's police on 10 November 1987 is still commemorated in the country. The police shot him dead after he came out on street in Dhaka, having two slogans written with bold white paint on his bareback and chest, "Down with Autocracy" and "Let Democracy be Free," as a mark of protest against Ershad's autocracy.⁵⁴ As mentioned earlier, he bribed and bought politicians and intellectuals to neutralize all opposition forces, but some of them remained unsold and undaunted. Meanwhile, he continued with his antics. He masqueraded as a poet, as a devout Muslim by associating himself with the Pir (Sufi master) of Atrashi, and from time to time he would visit mosques in the rural hinterland by helicopter, and would lie to the Friday congregations that he was in those mosques as he had dreamt of them the night before! He knew educated and urban people used to laugh at him, but he rightly understood that he had a large following in small towns and rural areas. He was frequently called by his cronies as *Palli Bandhu* (friend of the rural people). Sections of the Islamic parties and rural masses admired him most, especially from his home district, Rangpur and adjoining districts in northern Bangladesh. In hindsight, to give the Devil its due, one must admit that despite being a corrupt dictator, in comparison to Sheikh Mujib's and his daughter, Sheikh Hasina's one-party rule, Ershad Regime was much more liberal and tolerant. And, his administration's naïveté and inept election rigging, contrary to the skilled manoeuvring by Mujib's and Hasina's police, bureaucracy and party men, could not keep him in power beyond eight years. He did not have absolute control of the parliament à la

Mujib and Hasina, to linger his stay in power. Most importantly, unlike what both his successors, Khaleda and Hasina did afterwards, Ershad allowed the Dhaka University students a free hand in running their affairs by electing their representatives in the student union (DUCSU), which eventually became his nemesis as pro-BNP DUCSU leaders organized students to hammer the last nail into his regime's coffin. His popularity in the countryside could not salvage his regime, as he fell victim to the urban unrest. He could hardly get the stamp of legitimacy among the bulk of the educated urban populace.⁵⁵ One find Moudud Ahmed's comparative appraisal of Zia's and Ershad's failure quite interesting:

If the fall of Zia could be accounted for by his failure to (a) contain the freedom fighters within the army (b) implement the denationalisation and privatisation programme to the extent he had promised and (c) resist the growth of anti-independence forces within the government, Ershad's success was in overcoming all those failures. *But Ershad's greatest failure was that he could not develop the institution of administration and politics as he had pledged when he assumed power.* [Emphasis added]⁵⁶

However, his political opponents, especially those from the BNP under Khaleda Zia and BNP's student front, eventually played the decisive role in overthrowing Ershad, who was forced to resign on 6 December 1990. Since students, especially from Dhaka University played a major role in all nationalist movements in what is Bangladesh today since the 1940s, Ershad's decision to disband his student front, Natun Bangla Chhatro Samaj, was possibly not a wise decision with regard to his inability to divide the student community in the country to forestall the massive student movement that eventually overthrew his regime!

Although, thanks to Zia's de-nationalization programme, his introduction of *Gram Sarkar* (de-centralization of the civil administration and improvement of local self-government institutions at the grassroots), his creation of more job opportunities for Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East, and his pioneering role in the establishment of garment industries, Bangladesh economy remained more or less stable under Ershad. And, the latter also further accentuated the infrastructure development process. However, he was the first head of state and government of

Bangladesh to personally indulge in corruption, and the promotion of a hedonistic lifestyle blatantly. Thus, corruption and shamelessness have become integral to the polity. As this writer has argued, even after the overthrow of the dictator in 1990, “Ershad Syndrome” has remained the linchpin of the statecraft of Bangladesh.⁵⁷ He virtually exposed Bangladeshis in every layer of society with regard to their temptation to easy money, fame and power. While corruption got a hefty premium under his patronage, thanks to his widely known philandering and multiple polygamous relationships, illicit relationships were getting de-tabooed in society, especially in the middle and upper classes. It appears that every beneficiary of Ershad’s malpractices did have no qualms about losing face, honour and dignity. They included politicians like Ataur Rahman Khan, Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, Shah Moazzem Hossain, Moudud Ahmed and Kazi Zafar; renowned professors like Abdul Majeed Khan and Wahidul Haque (of the University of Toronto); and many others. Married and unmarried women, celebrities, singers, actors, newsreaders, housewives and others had no qualms about being closely associated with the corrupt dictator. In short, shamelessness and Machiavellian contempt for ethics and morality became pervasive under Ershad. Elements of the Right, Left, Moderate, Liberal, Islamic and Secular joined the Ershad bandwagon, some for a piece of the pie, and some for the mere crumbs. Seemingly, shame, self-respect and all ethical values disappeared. This is what one may call the “Ershad Syndrome” in Bangladesh, the degree and intensity of which have gone up tremendously since his disgraceful overthrow in 1990. Interestingly, the “Ershad Syndrome” has become more accentuated after his fall, and is still around.

Ershad’s gentle and sombre demeanour—a soft-spoken poet with the image of a humble, godly person with a disarming smiling face—was very deceptive. Soon after he took over, he gave the impression that he had no political ambitions whatsoever, and he was there to get rid of corruption at every layer of society and administration. So much so that, renowned Bangladeshi American political scientist Zillur Rahman Khan went gaga over him. Khan believed that, unlike Zia, Ershad would usher in good and development-oriented governance. And, after Ershad had sent a few corrupt politicians to prison, he writes:

Ershad has attempted to establish his credibility as a strong and honest leader by other means as well The steps that Ershad has so far taken reflect his pursuit of the model of legitimization that Zia and other military leaders in different LDCs followed Regardless of the withdrawal of certain policy objectives, the present military leadership has been generally successful in emulating the transformation model Ershad's claimed credits may ultimately outweigh his alleged liabilities.⁵⁸

However, what Zillur Rahman Khan could not foresee in 1984 that what Ershad had promised after his coup that he would transfer power to an elected civilian government (after rectifying the defects in the system of governance) was not going to happen; and that Ershad's rule would further destabilize and degenerate the country, almost beyond any rectification, in the short run. Lawrence Ziring is far more incisive than Khan. After Ershad had assumed the presidency, politicians' demand for the holding of elections grew louder than before. Soon, Ershad started reforming local government administration for the benefit of the more populous countryside. Thus, he started relying more on peasants and the armed forces to consolidate his power, than on the urban-based politicians and intellectuals. Meanwhile, he also promised to hold elections in 1985, which as mentioned above, took place in May 1986. In 1984 Ershad had floated his own political party, *Janadal*, with support from members of the armed forces, bureaucracy and ordinary people. Many retired military officers and bureaucrats, big businessmen and rural elites joined his party, which captured most seats in the elections of local bodies in the countryside and small towns. Ershad managed to draw support for his regime from corrupt urban and rural elites, as he bought their loyalty by doling out around 30 per cent of foreign aid (which was much higher than eight per cent, normally siphoned of foreign aid for private gain, elsewhere illegally, in the Third World). The Ershad Administration's main feature was plundering of money from foreign aid and development projects. We may agree with Ziring that "the Ershad administration was squeezing the life out of the nation and that the national development and progress of which it often spoke, was solely for the benefit of those controlling the country's political life."⁵⁹

Ershad's military regime (1982–1990) had immeasurably damaged the social fabric of Bangladesh. Whatever the traditional Bangladesh society had been nurturing as its core values for centuries, such as mutual love, respect and trust, honesty and integrity, self-respect, shame and dignity were impaired, and to a large extent, destroyed forever. In other words, Ershad knew the art of luring people into doing the most repulsive things with money and power. No wonder some renowned intellectuals, professionals, politicians and celebrities joined hands with him as ministers and close associates. Very renowned female socialites and even “respectable” married women were close companions or associates of the military dictator. Consequently, post-Ershad Bangladesh has become even more corrupt, graceless, anarchic, and the government more autocratic and unaccountable than before.

One may draw a line to differentiate the first two military rulers, Zia and Ershad, who were at the helm of the statecraft of Bangladesh for fifteen years. As their personalities and circumstances that brought them to power were very different, so were their *modi operandi* and legacies. While the former is remembered as a dynamic patriot, an honest nation-builder full of creative ideas, the latter is remembered as a clever manipulator, corrupt ruler, a mendacious and hypocritical politician, a ruthless killer with a smiling face and soft voice. The two are simply not comparable. It is noteworthy that those who ridicule Zia as a “Pakistani agent” and a “pseudo-freedom fighter” since the early 1990s, once used to praise him as a freedom fighter and a patriotic nation-builder. The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), for example,—a pro-Soviet entity until the demise of the USSR—which was an active partner in Sheikh Mujib-led one-party BAKSAL dictatorship in 1975, which had earlier glorified the Mujib regime as a replica of Lenin's socialist government in the USSR, in 1972,⁶⁰ later in 1977 praised Ziaur Rahman as a progressive counterpoise to the reactionary forces in Bangladesh.⁶¹ Last but not least, while people openly celebrated Mujib's killing—including his close associates—and only a handful of people attended his funeral prayer (hours after his unlamented death at the hands of rebel soldiers—millions publicly mourned Zia's killing and attended his funeral.

From the failures of Mujib and Zia, Ershad learnt quite well how to maintain the precarious balance between the military and civil, Islamist and secular oligarchs. He was the most skilled political acrobat and magician

that Bangladesh has ever witnessed. He simply knew about the hidden transcript of the bulk of the people in Bangladesh, that they are vulnerable to corruption, illicit power and privileges, and most importantly, lack commitment to any individual ideologies, and thanks to centuries of foreign rule, have very little or no sense of belonging to the state. He exposed the cross sections of society, from highly educated intellectuals to distinguished politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats, and even popular socialite women, that everybody had a price, and when paid, they sold themselves to him with no qualms about their decisions to do so! Although Ershad was not the first or only autocratic, corrupt ruler, he was the one to institutionalize corruption, deception, debauchery and hypocrisy. His contributions to the degeneration process outweigh those of all the previous and succeeding regimes in the country. He was as deceptive as Bhutto, dishonest as Marcos, cruel as Suharto and hypocritical and “Islam-loving” as Ziaul Haq. Ershad was a smooth operator. He eliminated his opponents without any fanfare. Zia was most likely a victim of his manoeuvring. Professor B.K. Jahangir of Dhaka University has given an eye-witness account of Ershad’s ruthless killing of student demonstrators on the campus of the university in early 1983:

On 14 February 1983 the students confronted the state security police, and a number of people were killed. The people took between five and 15 bodies. On 15 February the students assembled in the Dhaka University campus to protest against the killing. The students recovered only one body from Dhaka Medical College At that time, about 1 pm there were already about 200 severely injured students in the hospital Suddenly, 21 trucks with hundreds of policemen and soldiers, armed with sticks and machine guns, entered the campus. They attacked the crowd, beating them indiscriminately, including children and women About 200 took refuge in the Dean’s office, 145 were arrested there No single room was left intact. Police and soldiers entered all of them, smashing the doors and taking people out to beat them. About 50 girls were raped and ill-treated.⁶²

Although Ershad served only six years for misappropriation of public funds, renowned jurist Dr Kamal Husain observed, soon after his overthrow

in 1990, that the dictator deserved at least a 500-year-long term for the various crimes he had committed against the people of Bangladesh. His military takeover came as a bolt from the blue. It was least expected and totally unnecessary. The country was just recovering from the trauma of the bloody Liberation War and the Post-Liberation disasters—socio-political and economic mismanagement, famine, political assassinations and military rule following the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, when it came under military rule.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh is a predatory state. Mujib's predatory regime relied on civilians to maintain law and order, develop the country and defend the country's sovereignty from known and unknown enemies. Zia and Ershad established a civil-military oligarchy to do the job. Since then, successive governments have devoted themselves to it assiduously. As Tariq Ali has underscored, the military rule of Ayub Khan depended on a very good understanding between civil bureaucrats and military top brasses,⁶³ all military regimes everywhere, including Bangladesh, are no exceptions in this regard. The military lobby predominates in all post-martial law regimes as well, including Bangladesh.

As a result, Bangladesh is one of the worst examples of a postcolonial country. The predominance of colonial culture has retarded the growth of civility, respect for the rule of law, human rights and dignity of the individual. People like Ziaur Rahman, who are relatively honest and patriotic, cannot survive in the sea of corruption and hedonism Bangladesh has become since Liberation. In comparison to a person like Ershad (who has a following among the lower classes and even the educated), Bangladesh cannot break free from bad governance unless it becomes ethical and liberal. Among others, this has only been possible with a team of visionary leaders in Western Europe, North America, Japan and South Korea. Basically, the military rule of postcolonial countries represents the colonial state. States that emerged from colonialism and were under martial law often suffer from the double jeopardy of postcolonialism and martial law. Bangladesh is one such example.

Footnotes

¹ Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, University Press Limited, Dhaka 1992, p. 105.

² Ibid., p. 101.

³ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴ Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*, Zed Press, London 1979, pp. 114–17.

⁵ Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh: From Mujib to Ershad, An Interpretive Study*, University Press Limited, Dhaka 1992, p. 110.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 108–13.

⁷ *Ittefaq* (Bengali daily), 16 August 1975.

⁸ Syed Badrul Ahsan, “The wounds inflicted on Bangladesh’s secular ethos”, bdnews24.com, 23rd August 2016.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Basant Chatterjee, *Inside Bangladesh Today: An Eye-witness Account*, S. Chand & Co, New Delhi 1973, pp. 155–7.

¹¹ Syed Badrul Ahsan, “*Bangabandhu’s men—on Aug 15 and after*”, *Daily Star* (Bangladesh), August 15, 2012; Taj Hashmi, “1975: The Crime and Verdict in Retrospection”, bdnews24.com, 25th Nov 2009.

¹² Syed Badrul Ahsan, “*Bangabandhu’s men—on Aug 15 and after*”, *Daily Star* (Bangladesh), August 15, 2012

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14 Mohiuddin Ahmed, *Jashoder Utthan Poton: Osthir Somoyer Rajniti* (in Bengali), Prothoma, Dhaka 2014, *passim*.

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17 *Ibid.*, pp. 125, 138–41.

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- 22 Talukder Maniruzzaman, “Civilianization of Military Regimes: A Comparative Analysis,” *The BIIS Journal* (Bangladesh), Vol. 1, 1980; Golam Hossain, *General Ziaur Rahman and the BNP: Political Transformation of a Military Regime*, University Press Limited, Dhaka 1988, pp. 17–22; Mahfuzul H. Chowdhury, Muhammad A. Hakim, and Habib Zafarullah, “Politics and Government: The Search for Legitimacy”, in Habib Zafarullah (ed), *The Zia Episode in Bangladesh Politics*, University Press Limited, Dhaka 1996, pp. 25–31.
- 23 Mahfuzul H. Chowdhury, Muhammad A. Hakim, and Habib Zafarullah, “Politics and Government: The Search for Legitimacy”, in Habib Zafarullah (ed), *The Zia Episode in Bangladesh Politics*, University Press Limited, Dhaka 1996, pp. 31–3.
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- 31 Ibid., p. 215.

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34 Ibid., p. 143.

35 Author’s interview with Major General (ret) Syed Muhammad Ibrahim, 10th August 2020.

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6. “Dynastic Democracy” Under the “Battling Begums,” 1991–2021

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*It is impossible to practice parliamentary politics without having
patience, decency, politeness and courtesy.*

—Khaleda Zia (<https://www.quotetab.com/quote/by-khaleda-zia/it-is-impossible-to-practice-parliamentary-politics-without-having-patience-dece>)

*We don't want anything in return. Whatever we have given to
India so far, they will remember it forever!*

—Sheikh Hasina (NTV, Bangladesh, ntvbd.online, 30 May 2018)

Keywords Battling Begums – Khaleda – Hasina – Ghulam Azam – Motiur Rahman Nizami – War Crime Tribunal – Shabagh – Hefazat-e-Islam – Mufti Shafi – Delwar Hussain Sayeedi – Tariq Rahman – Hawa Bhaban – Iajuddin Ahmed – BNP – Awami League – BDR Massacre – Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed – Fakhruddin Ahmed

Khaleda Behind the Wheel: Bumpy Ride to Hazardous Drive, 1991–2006

Despite Ershad's and Hasina's numerous attempts to fracture the BNP by replacing Khaleda Zia by someone compliant to both of them, the party has remained loyal to her leadership and has remained united. After Ershad had failed to legitimize his regime by holding two rounds of parliamentary elections, and even after making Islam the State Religion in 1988, and

finally, after Hasina joined hands with Khaleda to topple the Ershad regime, he had to resign in December 1990. A neutral caretaker government oversaw the parliamentary elections on 27 February 1991. Khaleda Zia's BNP captured 140 out of the 300 seats. On 20 March Khaleda Zia became the first female Prime Minister of Bangladesh with the support of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami. And, after the enactment of the 12th Amendment in August 1991, which restored the parliamentary system of government, Khaleda Zia became the executive Prime Minister.

Illustrating Khaleda Zia's successful economic and educational reforms, especially towards "expanding the economic opportunities available to women," a scholarly piece in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is full of praise for her first term of office, and critical of the second:

Her efforts were hampered, however, by a cyclone in 1991 that killed more than 130,000 people and caused more than \$2 billion in damage. In February 1996 she overwhelmingly won a second term in office, but her victory was tainted by an opposition-led boycott of the election; heeding the call of opposition groups, which claimed that the government would rig the outcome in its favour, roughly nine-tenths of eligible voters abstained. After a wave of strikes and protests, she resigned the following month. In 2001 Khaleda regained power, promising to eliminate both corruption and terrorism. Both, however, remained problematic throughout her second term. She stepped down at the end of 2006, passing authority to a caretaker administration until elections could be held.¹

After eight years of Ershad's quasi-military corrupt rule, Khaleda's ascendancy to power was "indeed a victory—a restoration of people's power and their universal right of franchise," as Ershad's former Vice-President Moudud Ahmed writes later.² However, Khaleda's arch rival Hasina did not concede defeat (in the grotesque Trumpian manner, as it happened in the US after Joe Biden's electoral victory in 2020). Alleging "subtle rigging" in the polls, Hasina publicly asserted: "I won't let Khaleda rule in peace for a day."³ Ironically, Hasina kept her words! Mahmudur Rahman has aptly argued that soon after Khaleda's taking over as Prime Minister, Hasina played a shrewd role, as she "sowed the seed of permanent enmity" between Khaleda and Ershad by "literally forcing" the former to

move Ershad from the state of house arrest to the Dhaka Central Jail as a prisoner, where he spent the entire five-year term of Khaleda's tenure as Prime Minister.⁴ Meanwhile, Khaleda committed two major mistakes, which eventually led to her electoral defeat in 1996. She unwittingly succumbed to the pressure of the pro-Awami League and the so-called pro-Liberation leaders and activists who demanded the public trial of the Jamaat-e-Islami Chief Ghulam Azam, for his alleged commission of "war crimes" against Bangladesh as a collaborator of the Pakistani Occupation Army in 1971. Her government arrested Ghulam Azam, who despite holding a Pakistani passport had become the chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh. Interestingly, Khaleda became Prime Minister in early 1991 with the support of Jamaat MPs, as BNP did not have the majority. However, soon the BNP managed to get a comfortable majority in the parliament by securing twenty-odd nominated female MPs, in accordance with the constitutional provision. Thus, the Jamaat became dispensable for Khaleda and her party! The Khaleda administration's lopsided and ambivalent policies towards Ghulam Azam—it arrested him for holding the position of the chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh as a "foreign national" (or Pakistani)—was nothing short of a breach of trust, which alienated the Jamaat from the BNP, so much so that it joined hands with BNP's arch rival, Awami League. Meanwhile, the rabidly anti-Jamaat and the so-called pro-Liberation elements organized a public trial of Ghulam Azam as a "war criminal." However, soon the bubble of the "public trial" was burst after the Supreme Court had ruled that Azam was a citizen, not a foreign national.⁵

Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia brought certain changes in the administration. The first thing to go was Ershad's local government administration structure, which divided the country into several hundred upazilas.

The abolition of the upazila councils without any specific plan to improve them drew wide criticism from the opposition. Seemingly, Khaleda abolished the upazila councils because in 1990 Ershad's party had won majorities in the councils, in elections which the BNP and Awami League had boycotted. While Khaleda was taking some haphazard steps to bring administrative reforms, Hasina did not leave any stone unturned to discredit the former's government. As William Milam writes, in late 1991, Hasina wrote to several foreign diplomats criticizing the BNP government's

policies and suggesting that outsiders should promote Awami League policies, instead. However, Milam praises Khaleda's privatization programme, and keeps her Finance Minister Saifur Rahman in high esteem for pushing Bangladesh towards a market economy to attract more domestic and foreign investments in the country. Rahman is said to have taken bold steps against self-defeating economic policies.⁶ Meanwhile, Khaleda had become a hostage to her own "kitchen cabinet," which had been her own making, or imposed by her siblings and the two sons, one does not know. She made her elder sister, known as "Chocolate Apa" a minister in her cabinet, and her two brothers became very influential in the government. Khaleda's promoting close relatives to decision making positions was a big departure from her late husband's style of administration, which was relatively less corrupt, and not nepotistic at all.

However, the Khaleda administration achieved some successes too, especially in the realm of education. Her government introduced free and compulsory primary education in the country, and introduced free education for girls up to Grade 10. Her "Food for Education" programme encouraged poor parents to send their female children to school. Her canal digging programme augmented agricultural production and reduced floods. Her government also established the National and Open universities in Bangladesh. Her new industrial policy also attracted direct private foreign investments in the country. The construction of the Jamuna Bridge across the Brahmaputra started during her first term (1991–1996).⁷

The demolition of the Babri Mosque in India in December 1992 and the anti-Hindu communal backlash in Bangladesh followed the "Ghulam Azam Crisis" to test, and eventually destabilize the Khaleda government. In January 1994, came another rude shock for the ruling party. The BNP lost to mayoral elections in Dhaka and Chittagong. The alleged rigging of a by-election by the ruling party at Magura in March 1994, seemingly, prepared the ground for its exit from power. In December 1994 all opposition members resigned from the parliament, and intensified their violent agitations against the BNP government, through almost endless general strikes and public rallies. The resignation of the opposition MPs from the parliament was the first major step in this regard. The parliament was dissolved in November 1995, and elections were supposed to be held in ninety days. Accordingly, elections were held on 15 February 1996, which the opposition parties boycotted en masse. Only around 20 per cent of

voters cast their votes. Finally, thanks to pro-Awami League bureaucrats', intellectuals' and others' agitations, on 27 March 1996, the Khaleda government was forced to amend the Constitution (the 13th Amendment), conceding the opposition demand for a caretaker government to hold all general elections in the country. Begum Zia submitted her resignation to the President of the Republic on the same evening.⁸ Soon afterwards, on 19 May 1996, Army Chief Lieut. General Nasim staged an abortive coup against the caretaker government under BNP's President Abdur Rahman Biswas. President Biswas successfully mobilized support of loyal generals. They defeated Nasim and his loyal troops and arrested him and his associates. The attempted coup is believed to be pro-Awami League, orchestrated by Hasina. Myisteriously enough, after Hasina had won the parliamentary elections and formed government in June 1996, the caretaker President Justice Habibur Rahman (believed to be soft-on-Awami League) did not take any disciplinary action against the abortive coupmakers. His government simply retired them from the Army, with full benefits.⁹

The Awami-Jamaat's concerted agitation against the BNP government eventually led to its humiliating defeat in the elections in June 1996 at the hands of the Awami League. A rigged parliamentary by-election at Magura constituency became Khaleda's nemesis, as the Awami-Jamaat alliance organized massive anti-BNP demonstrations throughout the country. Soon the Jamaat demanded a constitutional amendment to hold all future elections through an unelected short-term "non-partisan" caretaker government. Secessionist, anti-Bangladesh *Shanti Bahini* insurgents (mainly Chakma hill tribes) in Chittagong Hill Tracts had caused further discomfiture for the Khaleda administration. Far from being critical of the tribal secessionist insurgents, as K. Srinivasan, a former Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh reveals, Hasina privately told him in 1992 that the Bangladesh Army was responsible for the *Shanti Bahini* insurgency, and that it was the Army's "put-up job" in order to entrench themselves in power.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that India and its intelligence agency RAW had been allegedly inciting, arming, training and harbouring leaders and guerrilla fighters of the *Shanti Bahini* in India. Indian analyst Subir Bhaumik affirms, days after the killing of Mujib, India is said to have promised leaders of the separatist guerrilla outfit "all kinds of assistance for a guerrilla war against the Bangladesh security forces."¹¹

It is noteworthy that Sheikh Hasina and top Jamaat leaders, including Motiur Rahman Nizami and the National Democratic Party (NDP) leader Salahuddin Kader Chowdhury, jointly held public rallies and press conferences in support of a caretaker government. Interestingly, two decades after this bonhomie between Hasina and the two leaders from the NDP and Jamaat, her government hanged both (Nizami and Chowdhury) for their alleged war crimes committed in 1971.¹² And Hasina also scrapped the provision of the caretaker government in the Constitution. Ershad's Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami played the decisive role in the Awami League's electoral victory in 1996. Interestingly, the BNP under Khaleda played the same old game the Hasina's Awami League had played after the election of Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister in 1991. This time, again, Khaleda Zia did not concede on the grounds that Hasina had rigged the elections, and hence was an "illegitimate Prime Minister without people's mandate!"¹³ Very similar to what the Awami League did against the ruling BNP government during 1991–1996, the BNP also observed several general strikes (*hartals*) with walkouts and boycotts of the parliament.¹⁴

Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Hasina's first major act was the abrogation of the Indemnity Act of 1979, on 12 November 1996. The Act was originally promulgated as the Indemnity Ordinance by President Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmad on 26 September 1975 to give legal immunity from any punishment to the killers of Sheikh Mujib and others on 15 August 1975, which was later enacted as the Indemnity Act by the parliament by more than two-third majority vote on 9 July 1979, during the presidency of Ziaur Rahman. It was also known as the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution.¹⁵ Not long after the abrogation of the Indemnity Act, the Hasina government arrested several killers of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, most of his family members, and some his close associates and party members. Several BNP leaders and Ghulam Azam of the Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh tried in vain to convince Khaleda Zia (the leader of the opposition in the parliament) to protest the illegal abrogation of the Indemnity Act (enacted by more than two-third majority vote in 1979 by simple majority in 1996) and the arrests of Lieutenant Colonels Syed Farook Rahman and Sultan Shahriar Rashid Khan, and former state minister Taheruddin Thakur and others involved in the 1975 coup and killing of Mujib and others.¹⁶

In December 1996, Hasina signed a water-sharing treaty with India to share surface waters at the Farakka Barrage. The treaty was valid for thirty years. It was not a comprehensive treaty, was based on quite old data on water flow in the Ganges, and there was no guarantee of adequate water availability for Bangladesh during the dry season. “The treaty favours the hydro-hegemonic state (India) and solidifies the status quo”; and has no conflict resolution clause. Yet, as one scholar observes, a superficial agreement was a better option for Bangladesh, than having no agreement at all!¹⁷ However, the BNP and other opposition parties have been very critical of the Ganges Treaty. They allege that firstly, India signed the agreement to legitimize itself as a benevolent neighbour without guaranteeing anything to Bangladesh; and secondly, to give some political advantage to the Awami League of Hasina, which is traditionally a “pro-Indian” political party.

Hasina’s next important achievement was the peace agreement with the *Shanti Bahini*, which was signed on 2 December 1997. We may agree with Mahmudur Rahman that since India was nervous about the *Shanti Bahini* insurgency as it could be a contagion for its own separatist forces in the Northeast, India favoured Hasina’s signing a peace agreement with the *Shanti Bahini*. India also did not want to create problems for the Hasina government as unlike the BNP, Awami League since the emergence of Bangladesh had been very soft on India.¹⁸ Since the peace agreement came into being after several years of armed insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, after so many rounds of secret meetings between the government and *Shanti Bahini* negotiators for months, the BNP registered its unhappiness for such a “secretive deal,” and for granting “extensive autonomy” to the rebel hill tribes. “The BNP chose to raise the issue primarily in the streets,” observes former US Ambassador William Milam.¹⁹ One, however, cannot deny that the Peace Agreement was possible under the Awami League government as both the *Shanti Bahini* and its Indian sponsors felt comfortable about signing the deal with Hasina, who had been very close to India since long.

Meanwhile, the ruling Awami League and the BNP, the main opposition party, had been at loggerheads. Leaders and followers of the parties were using obnoxious languages against each other. Interestingly, Prime Minister Hasina was spreading some wild rumours about Bangladesh being infested with Al Qaeda adherents; and most importantly, she was implicating

Khaleda Zia and BNP supporters with promoting Islamist terrorism across Bangladesh. It is noteworthy that from 1999 onwards, some Islamist terror outfits, all home-grown with possible links with Al Qaeda, resorted to terrorist bomb blasts across the country, killing dozens of innocent people. Hasina took full advantage of these terror attacks to vilify her political rivals, especially the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, as the main conduits of spreading Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh. Hasina also maligned her own country abroad, by telling foreign governments and media about the presence of Al Qaeda, allegedly under BNP-Jamaat patronage. Her cry wolf about the “impending al Qaeda attacks” in Bangladesh was quite effective. So much so that when President Clinton visited the country on 20 March 2001, his staff had to cancel the President’s scheduled visit to the rural village of Joypura, sixty miles from Dhaka, “because of concerns raised by the Secret Service.”²⁰ Hasina and the ruling party were so adamant to malign her arch political rival Khaleda Zia as an Al Qaeda supporter that days before the parliamentary elections in October 2001 (days after 9/11), coloured posters came out on street corners of Dhaka city, with pictures of Osama bin Laden and Khaleda Zia (side by side) with the caption that the latter was closely linked with the former.

The 2001 parliamentary elections brought BNP and Khaleda Zia back to the pedestal of power. Her party captured 193 seats out of the total 300 seats securing 40.97 per cent of the cast votes. Seventy-four per cent people cast their votes. Interestingly, securing 40.13 per cent cast votes, Hasina’s Awami League managed to get only sixty-two seats, under the prevalent electoral system. BNP’s coalition partners, the Jamaat-e-Islami got seventeen, Islami Oikya Jote two and Jatiya Party (Manzur) four seats. In total, Khaleda Zia’s coalition group had 216 or more than two-thirds majority in the parliament. Despite Hasina’s vitriolic attacks on the BNP and its coalition partner, Jamaat-e-Islami, as Al Qaeda agents, the BNP-led coalition had a landslide victory in the elections in October 2001. And, international observers declared the elections as free and fair.²¹ This, however, did not deter Hasina from vociferously declaring the elections were “blatantly rigged” in favour of Khaleda. One may recall, in 1991 she felt the elections had been “subtly rigged” in favour of the BNP-led coalition! It is noteworthy that despite securing more than two-third majority in the parliament, Khaleda did not scrap the illegal abrogation of the Indemnity Act by the Hasina government. One retired Bangladeshi

ambassador attributes this to the pressure by the Indian Lobby, and to some of her own party leaders' opposition to restoring the Indemnity Act and releasing the army officers and civilians arrested in connection with the coup that removed Sheikh Mujib's one-party rule in August 1975. He believes that despite being the beneficiary of the coup, the BNP distanced itself from the coupmakers, which eventually was proven to be too costly for the party and the country at large. He believes, BNP's inaction virtually legitimized Mujib's one-party dictatorship, and strengthened the Awami League, which—as of early 2021—virtually runs a one-party Awami dictatorship in Bangladesh since 2008.²²

No sooner had Khaleda become Prime Minister than the country came under the grip of extortionists and robbers. Khaleda unwittingly engaged the Army to restore order. The Army's "Operation Clean Heart" became controversial due to politically motivated arrests and torture of suspects. The army operation was not different from the police operation under Mujib's Special Power Act of 1974. Arbitrary arrests and torture, along with detentions of suspects without trial for months were quite embarrassing for the Khaleda's second term in office. Despite the army operation, which lasted for a few months, over 2500 people were murdered in 2002, and "perhaps more" in 2003. The deteriorating law and order situation gave Hasina more opportunities to stage country-wide *hartals* (general strikes) "on a monthly basis."²³ The Awami League and its allies also boycotted the parliament for months together. And, taking advantage of the opposition's absence in the house, in May 2004 during a year-long boycott of the parliament by the Awami League the ruling coalition made the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which raised the number of nominated women MPs from thirty to forty-five, raised the retirement age of Supreme Court Justices from sixty-five to sixty-seven, and mandated that pictures of the President and Prime Minister be displayed in all government offices. The Awami League took exception to the 14th Amendment as it thought the BNP government wanted to get Sheikh Mujib's picture removed from government offices; and it wanted K.M. Hasan (who Awami league believed was pro-BNP) the Supreme Court Chief Justice to head the following caretaker government after his retirement in 2004, by raising the retirement age of justices across the board only to get their "own man" become the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government to favour the BNP, after the general elections which were due in 2006. Interestingly, after the

enactment of the 14th Amendment, Hasina grudgingly returned to the parliament in mid-2004, but publicly asserted that her party would debate important issues in the House and “gear up street agitation,” simultaneously.²⁴

Unlike her first term (1991–1996) in office, Khaleda Zia’s second term (2001–2006) as Prime Minister was very tumultuous and eventful, for her government and the country at large. Due to the metamorphic changes in global politics and security issues due to the 9/11 attacks, Khaleda’s second term went through very turbulent and unpredictable challenges, both internally and externally. And, thanks to her administration’s committing one grave mistake after another, her second term went through almost all the possible challenges a corrupt and incompetent regime might come across anywhere in the world. Many of them were beyond her administration’s knowledge and control. This time, Khaleda had an unbelievably large cabinet of sixty ministers and state ministers, which she cut down to fifty-one in May 2004, which was still too big for any country in the world. In 2004, her government took two disastrous decisions, which later proved almost fatal to the country. One was allowing Taiwan to open an Economic and Cultural Centre or trade mission in Dhaka, which is said to have clandestinely issued visas to Bangladeshi nationals to visit Taiwan. Some top cabinet members of the government, all from the BNP, are said to have received hefty bribes from Taiwan in return. China reacted angrily to this and warned Bangladesh of “unimaginable consequences,” as the action reflected Bangladesh’s shift from the “One China” policy.²⁵ This imprudent move by the Khaleda government alienated China from her government and party. So much so that as of early 2021, seemingly, China does not fully trust the BNP as a reliable entity to interact with in the future! Another imprudence of Khaleda’s administration was the creation of the dreadful Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which is virtually a death-squad, composed of military and police personnel, who has eliminated hundreds of criminals, political dissidents and suspects, and innocent people since its inception in 2004. Thus, the Khaleda administration’s guilt in the creation of the RAB is inescapable.

The day 21 August 2004 saw unknown assailants attack an Awami League rally with hand grenades, killing twenty-four Awami League leaders and workers in the heart of Dhaka. Sheikh Hasina, who narrowly escaped the grenade attack, immediately accused Khaleda and her party members of

murder. The attack was blamed on Khaleda's elder son, Tarique Rahman, the State Minister for Home Affairs, Lutfuzzaman Babar and several other BNP leaders. According to a leading Bangladeshi newspaper report, some Islamist terrorists were behind the attack.²⁶ The attack further aggravated the already strained relationship between the two major parties. Although it remains unsubstantiated, Sheikh Hasina and pro-Awami League people claim that the grenade attack plot to kill Hasina was made at the Hawa Bhaban, among others, by Tariq Rahman, Lutfuzzaman Babar, the State Minister for Home Affairs, Deputy Minister Abdus Salam Pintu and Prime Minister's Political Secretary Haris Chowdhury. They were all in league with the Harkat Ul Jihad al-Islam (HUJI) activist Mufti Hannan, the "mastermind" of the grenade attack.²⁷ Since the above report does not give any conclusive evidence, one may not take it seriously. Paradoxically, while the report implicates the state minister Babar, who was in charge of the Home Ministry, as one of the masterminds of the grenade attack on Hasina's rally, it also reveals: "The government was dithering over the permission for the rally," which the opposition leader Hasina also attended on the fateful 21 August 2004!²⁸ One wonders if the minister-in-charge of the Home Affairs was an accomplice to the grenade attack, why would he have "dithered over" the permission for the rally! One ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) leader's alleged confession that the grenade attack was ULFA's handiwork to punish Hasina for arresting Anup Chetia (ULFA leader) in 1997, while she was the Prime Minister, is at best not verifiable.²⁹ The contradictory pieces of evidence, assertions and judgements with regard to the grenade attack are mind-boggling. There are at least two sets of reports and assertions by prosecutors, judges, police, convicts, journalists and politicians. Did Mufti Hannan or Lutfuzzaman Babar plan the entire event? What about ULFA's alleged involvement in orchestrating the whole thing? Did Babar and some BNP leaders harbour ULFA assailants? Did he contrive the so-called Joj Mia Story with the assistance of IGP Khoda Baksh by falsely accusing Jamal Ahmed aka Joj Mia, a poor villager from Noakhali of misleading the investigation? Did Joj Mia and Mufti Hannan confess of their involvement in the attack under duress?³⁰ Apparently, the incident of the grenade attacks on Hasina's rally will remain a mystery much like other significant events in Bangladesh over the past fifty years—such as the Mujib and Zia assassinations, the BDR

Massacre (February 2009). I believe the multiple versions of who did it and why, will last forever!

As elaborated on in Chap. 8, on 17 August 2005, near-synchronized blasts of improvised explosive devices in sixty-three out of sixty-four administrative districts targeted mainly government buildings and killed two persons. An extremist Islamist group named Jama'atul Mujahideen, Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility for the blasts, which aimed to press home JMB's demand for a replacement of the secular legal system with Islamic Shariah courts. Subsequent attacks on the courts in several districts killed twenty-eight people, including judges, lawyers and police personnel guarding the courts. A government campaign against the Islamic extremists led to the arrest of hundreds of senior and mid-level JMB leaders. In 2006, some top JMB leaders were tried and sentenced to death for their role in the murder of two judges.

The last two years of Khaleda's second term witnessed the worst consequences of the regime's corrupt, reckless and senseless decisions. The country was fast becoming "powerless" in the literal sense of the expression. As William Milam has rightly illustrated the situation prevalent during the second term of Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister. The government did not invest in electricity generation, and "primarily because of corruption" Bangladesh went through an acute shortage of electricity, especially in small towns and rural areas. Instead of paying attention to the problem of power crisis, the ruling BNP was busy addressing the factional feuds within the party, which were all about struggles for meagre resources by faction chiefs and their clients. The upshot being sharp polarization in the party, the BNP was virtually split into three prominent factions, headed by the Prime Minister herself; her son Tariq Rahman; and old-guard stalwarts, most of whom remained loyal to the memory and principles of the party's founder, Ziaur Rahman. The first major and visible victim of the internal feuds in the BNP was none other than Badruddoza Chowdhury, the President of the Republic. He lost the confidence of the ruling party and the Prime Minister, and ultimately his position as President of the Republic in 2004, because of his alleged "insufficient respect to the memory of Ziaur Rahman." BNP lawmakers "threatened impeachment, even though constitutional experts believed that a President could not be impeached on such a charge."³¹ Khaleda Zia and her partymen became so vindictive that they even did not allow the deposed President to hold any public rally or

gathering in Dhaka to protest his unceremonious dismissal, or address his supporters at any public place in the capital city. BNP muscle men literally chased him and his supporters away, on motorbikes.

Meanwhile, Khaleda Zia's sons came to the limelight as emerging tycoons. Tariq Rahman, the elder one, was almost running a parallel government to her mother's from a rented house in Dhaka, called "Hawa Bhaban." "Tariq Rahman was widely believed to be consolidating power to take over as Prime Minister after the next election—with the support of his mother," observes Ambassador Milam. He also believes that Tariq Rahman "appears to have been the driving force behind the all-out effort to ensure the re-election of the BNP through stacking the Election Commission and having a BNP partisan run the Caretaker Government," and that Tariq Rahman's "no-holds-barred" strategy led to the impasse and the escalation of violence leading to the military intervention on 11 January, 2007.³² The Hawa Bhaban earned so much notoriety that hundreds of stories about misappropriation of public wealth, extortion and plots of violent attacks on opposition leaders and activists are associated with it. On 2 April 2004, ten truckloads of smuggled arms and ammunition were seized in Chittagong and two more trucks reportedly went missing. And, Awami League supporters point fingers at the Hawa Bhaban as an accomplice to the smuggled arms.³³ There is, however, credible evidence that suggests that the smuggled arms were meant for ULFA separatist insurgents in Assam, India. Hasina's Information Minister Hasan Mahmud claims that Hawa Bhaban used to impose 10 per cent "toll" on business (which was an extortion) during the second term of the Khaleda government.³⁴ The popular perception of Tariq Rahman and his associates in the country is bad. People believe them to be absolutely corrupt. A close friend of mine told me about Tariq Rahman's defaulting on any rent to his house for five years, at Dhanmondi in Dhaka city. The property was used as another office of the ruling BNP party, besides the Hawa Bhaban.

Ambassador Milam has rightly assessed that due to internal tensions and frictions, by 2006 the BNP was a spent-force, was least likely to win the elections. Hence the election engineering by the party! By early 2006, the Khaleda government made "a series of appointments and transfer of officials among local jurisdictions to ensure that [BNP] supporters were in charge of districts that would be key to the election." Milam believes that Khaleda government's appointments to the Election Commission "were

considered highly partisan,” and that this provoked street action by the opposition, leading to the army takeover in January 2007. Meanwhile, a 14-party opposition alliance had been formed under the Awami League. Several disgruntled and humiliated former BNP leaders, including President Badruddoza and Oli Ahmed, had joined the alliance. Being convinced of its impending defeat at the elections, the BNP resorted to doctoring the voter list, which neutral experts, including the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) confirmed that the Khaleda government had added thirteen million more names (of fake voters) on the voter list. Soon the courts asked the Election Commission to correct the list. However, this was not carried out. This was followed by the opposition’s refusal to accept the immediate past Chief Justice K.M. Hasan as the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government to hold the elections. Hasan is said to have once held a position in the BNP. The opposition also demanded the removal of the Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz, allegedly, another BNP supporter. Soon the deadlock being further accentuated, the government decided to appoint Iajuddin Ahmed (from BNP) the President of the Republic to head the caretaker government to conduct the elections.³⁵ Although there was no constitutional problem in the incumbent President’s becoming the chief of the caretaker government, “it was inconsistent with the spirit of the ‘neutral caretaker government’ and therefore added to an already volatile situation,” observes Ali Reaz.³⁶ Meanwhile, Hasina had declared a day of protest in Dhaka against the blatant election engineering process by the Khaleda government. She had urged her supporters to assemble on 28 October 2006 at a public rally in the heart of the capital. She had quite subtly asked her followers to come to the rally with “*logi-boitha*” (bamboo poles and oars, used by country boatmen), which was an innuendo for sticks and weapons. And, her followers did not disappoint her. Thousands of armed Awami League supporters fought BNP and its ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, supporters, killing a couple of them on a street near the grand mosque, Baitul Mukarram, in the heart of downtown Dhaka. On 3 January 2007, the Awami League announced it would boycott the 22 January parliamentary elections. The Awami League planned a series of country-wide general strikes and transportation blockades.

Afterwards, the country further plunged into more chaos and violence. Soon, the opposition decided to withdraw from the elections as the Election Commission disqualified Hussein Muhammad Ershad, a coalition partner in

the 14-Party Alliance, from becoming a candidate as he had been convicted and jailed for five years on corruption charges, during the first term of the Khaleda government. It is noteworthy that meanwhile Ershad had contested several rounds of elections between 1991 and 2001 and got elected as MP. The opposition withdrawal of all their nominations on 3 January 2007 was followed by bloody street rioting that precipitated another round of military takeover on 11 January (aka 1/11) under the Army Chief, General Moeen U. Ahmed. On Iajuddin Ahmed's resignation, the General appointed a former bureaucrat, Fakhruddin Ahmed, who had also worked at World Bank and Bangladesh Bank, as the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government. Interestingly, Hasina welcomed the military takeover and publicly declared that her government would legitimize all actions taken by the military-backed caretaker government. She also said that the military takeover was a direct outcome of her country-wide movement against the erstwhile BNP government. The Fakhruddin government was out and out a military regime under General Moeen Ahmed, who had been "increasingly vocal in public about the aims of the Army/civilian CG [caretaker government]." ³⁷ The so-called 1/11 or the fifth military takeover in Bangladesh had many more reasons and far-reaching implications than what appear to be to the laymen. Apparently, as told by General Moeen Ahmed, on 11 January 2007, President Iajuddin Ahmed declared the state of emergency, resigned his "day job" as the chief of the caretaker government, and appointed Fakhruddin Ahmed as the chief of a new caretaker government. ³⁸ However, at least two superpowers, the US and the UK, and India and (indirectly) the UN played the leading role in installing the military-led caretaker government. In short, the coup was a civil-military officials' joint venture to capture power with the blessings of the US, the UK, India and Renata Lok Dessallien, the UNDP Chief in Bangladesh. Dessallien prepared a fabricated letter from the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to General Moeen, conveying the message that unless the General did not stop the holding of an election by Khaleda Zia on 22 January 2007 to bring the BNP to power through rigged polls, the UN would not take Bangladeshi troops to UN peacekeeping operations anywhere in the world, any more, reveals retired Bangladeshi Ambassador M. Serajul Islam. President Iajuddin Ahmed's former Press Secretary, and later an adviser in the caretaker government in 2007–2008 also corroborates Ambassador Serajul Islam's statement in this regard. ³⁹

Ambassador Islam further reveals:

Three foreign diplomats, namely the US Ambassador Patricia Butenis, the British High Commissioner Anwar Hossain Chowdhury and the UN Resident Coordinator Renata Lok Dessallien, as a trio, played a major role in that tumultuous period. They backed General Moeen to push the BNP-Jamaat alliances out of politics to punish BNP for its alliance with the Jamaat that their countries and the UN hated. They remained silent as General Moeen and New Delhi worked together to ensure that power went to the AL and not to the BNP at any cost. 1/11 thus ended a nascent democracy in Bangladesh and paved the way for one-party dictatorship that eventually emerged and one in which Bangladesh is firmly embedded today.⁴⁰

“India and important Western countries, namely US, UK, Canada, Australia, UNDP and so on were all in favour of 1/11, apparently because BNP and the caretaker government of President Iajuddin were supposedly ineffective in tackling JMB, which had allegedly linked with Al Qaeda, and some BNP high-ups were allegedly directly involved with these terrorist elements with the full knowledge of Tariq Rahman,” observes Kamal Siddiqui, a retired Bangladeshi bureaucrat and Principal Secretary of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia up to 2006. He mentions Khaleda Zia’s reliance on her brother Said Eskandar and his in-law General Masududdin Chowdhury (from their home district, Noakhali), General Hasan Masud, a cousin of Khaleda’s favourite Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury (Foreign Secretary) and General Moeen (from Noakhali as well), whom Khaleda made the Army Chief by superseding several generals, eventually backfired.⁴¹ In accordance with the desire of the US, the Chief Adviser’s job was “first offered to Professor Yunus, then a freshly recipient of the Nobel Prize for peace, but he wanted to come into the picture only after the general elections as the elected head, and he was allowed to form his own party towards that end, but at a time when all political activity was banned,” observes Siddiqui. “A number of invitations were sent out to notables to join the new proposed party, but unfortunately the response was rather poor, and this must have dampened Yunus’s spirit.”⁴²

Before further elaboration of what led to the so-called 1/11 and its consequences up to the parliamentary elections on 30 December 2008, I produce the eyewitness account of Air-Vice Marshal (retd.) Fakhrul Azam (Ronnie) who was the Chief of the Bangladesh Air Force in 2007. According to Ronnie, Moeen told him in the morning of the fateful 11 January 2007 that the President wanted to see the military chiefs. Accordingly, he went to Moeen's office, with a view to going to the President's office together. And, he saw a lady being seen off by Moeen outside his office. She was Ms Rennatta, the UNDP Chief in Bangladesh. Moeen told the Air Chief he was having difficulty in running the soldiers in the Army as they had come to know about a letter by the UN to him that if he continued to assist the government to conduct the elections as per schedule, the UN would withdraw Bangladeshi troops from UN peacekeeping operations. Ronnie told me: "He [Moeen] showed me the letter, which later on I came to learn was a made-up letter from Ms Renatta and not from the UN Headquarters," and that "The Army Chief asked the President to postpone the elections, declare the state of emergency and reform the Caretaker Government. On this the President said he would require some time to discuss with his Advisers But Moeen said there was nothing to discuss, the President needs to give decision then and there or else he would leave the place and then the President would have to face the consequences."⁴³ And the rest was history! The President was, sort of, forced to sign the papers and declared a state of emergency.

Initially, General Moeen Ahmed, who had the real power and authority, tried to remove both Khaleda and Hasina permanently from the political arena with his "minus two" formula to introduce a new type of democracy in the country, sort of a "military democracy"! He also tried to form a "king's party" by weakening the BNP and Awami League through the so-called reformists in the two parties, eventually to take over the parties. However, when this failed, the General struck a deal with Hasina with the help of Indian intelligence, after he had a secret understanding with the Indian government, especially the External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, during his well-publicized trip to New Delhi in February 2008.⁴⁴ Later, soon after the elections of 30 December 2008 (which had installed Hasina to power with two-thirds majority), Awami League's Secretary General Abdul Jalil admitted publicly that Awami League had come to power through a "deal." Pranab Mukherjee also narrates in his

book as to how he was instrumental in ensuring Hasina's electoral victory in 2008. He narrates an episode which virtually amounts to meddling in the internal affairs of Bangladesh. Mukherjee writes: "In February 2008 Bangladesh army chief Moin Ahmed came to India on a six-day visit. He called on me too. During the informal interaction, I impressed upon him the importance of releasing political prisoners." Then Mukherjee mentions his assuaging the fears of the General about his personal safety under the Hasina government: "I took personal responsibility and assured the general of his survival after Hasina's return to power With my intervention through the then National Security Adviser MK Narayanan, I ensured the release of all political prisoners and the nation's return to stability." He also mentions India's continued engagement with the military-backed caretaker government in Bangladesh. What is even more revealing in the autobiography is that after Hasina came to power, she assured that General Moeen would remain in office. Mukherjee also reprimanded Awami League leaders who deserted Hasina during her bad days: "In fact, when some Awami League leaders deserted her at the time she was in jail, I rebuked them for their stand and told them that to leave someone when one was down was unethical."⁴⁵

I find Mahmudur Rahman's (a former adviser of the Khaleda government in 2001–2006 and the editor of the proscribed Bengali daily *Amar Desh*) observation with regard to the military takeover in 2007 very comprehensive. He believes that the Bush administration wanted both a relatively secular and an anti-Islamist party in power in Bangladesh, and wanted India as the "strategic ally of the US in South Asia." Thus, a joint Indo-US-British diplomatic effort led to the "civil-military coup" in the country. "However, the US and India expected different outcomes of the experiment. At the initial stage of the conspiracy, US policy makers were determined to send both the ladies, Khaleda and Hasina, to exile [popularly known as the "Minus Two" formula] similar to forced exile of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto by General Musharraf of Pakistan in 1999. In fact, the then US ambassador Patricia Butenis and British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury confirmed to me about their plan on 7 January 2007," Rahman reiterates.⁴⁶ According to Mahmudur Rahman (who was an adviser to Khaleda Zia in her second term in office): "India's playing an altogether different game in installing an alternative government in Bangladesh by removing the BNP and its Islamist allies from the scene is

the lynchpin of the whole discourse on 1/11.” He believes: “India had started playing the game much earlier than the US and its allies, by keeping the West in the dark. In the post 1/11 Bangladesh, while the West remained obsessed with Dr Yunus’s project, the RAW continued extending its sphere of influence among all the institutions in the country including the army to create an environment that would ensure Hasina’s return to power. And RAW had the last laugh at the expense of CIA and British intelligence.”⁴⁷

Abdul Moyeen Khan, a former MP and a cabinet minister in Khaleda Zia’s government, has looked at the chaotic events leading to the so-called 1/11 from a different angle. He has compared the situation with what Pro-Trump mobs did on 6 January 2021 after storming the Capitol Building, and has highlighted their differences. Firstly, while 1/11 was the opposition’s (Awami League’s) handiwork, the latter was a direct outcome of the open incitement by President Trump urging his supporters to take over the Capitol; and secondly, 1/11 eventually paved the way for a corrupt and ruthless one-party dictatorship in Bangladesh, the latter signalled the restoration of multi-party democracy and accountable government in the US. As Moyeen Khan has put it, while external players (the US, the UK and India) “provided at least passive (if also active) support to the unconstitutional transfer of power” to the military, the main opposition party, the Awami League had done some ground work at least three years before it made 1/11 almost inevitable by unleashing a reign of terror in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh. The grenade attacks on Hasina’s rally in Dhaka on 21 August 2004 killing more than twenty people, and bringing truckloads of arms in the country, also in 2004, and wrecking the caretaker government under President Iajuddin Ahmed days before 1/11 were premeditated disruptions or preludes to 1/11, which later paved the way for one-party dictatorship in the country, with the blessings of India.⁴⁸

As it appears from a classified document—leaked by the WikiLeaks—of the US State Department, a report on the state of affairs in Bangladesh in December 2006 by Ambassador Patricia Butenis reveals that seemingly while the Awami League was “ill prepared to contest in January,” the BNP was “the party to beat” because of its connection with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Butenis informs the State Department about her long meeting with Hasina’s advisers, Kazi Zafrullah and Saber Hossain Chowdhury on 19 December 2006.⁴⁹ In view of this, we do not need any further evidence to prove the American connection to the staging of the so-called 1/11. Although the

Awami League was least prepared and willing to participate in the scheduled polls on 22 January, up to 3 January 2007, the party expressed its willingness to take part in the elections until thanks to the manipulation by General Moeen, Lutfuzzaman Babar (Khaleda's erstwhile State Minister for Home) and Justice Faezi General Ershad's nomination paper was cancelled on the ground that he was once convicted for corruption. In the afternoon of 11 January, General Moeen secretly circulated UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's fake letter to General Moeen, who is said to have asked the General to ensure fair elections in Bangladesh, otherwise the UN would not employ Bangladeshi troops in UN Peacekeeping Operations. The UNDP's Resident Coordinator Renata Lok Dessallien had been a party to it. Meanwhile, Moeen had instigated rivalry between supporters of the two major political parties, the BNP and Awami League, and was instrumental in cancelling nomination of General Ershad to take part in the scheduled polls on 22 January, on the flimsy ground that Ershad had been once convicted on corruption charges. Moeen is said to have written this in his autobiographical account that he was looking for such a letter from the UN. Thanks to the opposition of the US, the UK and other Western countries, Moeen failed to install a full-fledged military rule or declare martial law in Bangladesh. Although he was desperate to declare himself as the President of the Republic.⁵⁰ In the meantime, the Indo-Western lobby removed the BNP-Jamaat coalition from power because the coalition had not followed their policies.

General Moeen Ahmed writes in his autobiographical account that he took the decision to save Bangladesh from saving it from a civil war, and not out of any desire to capture power for himself. He has also catalogued what he achieved during his short tenure as the military chief of the caretaker government.⁵¹ We cannot give him the benefit of the doubt as an honest broker, who, as he claims, just wanted to restore order and democracy in Bangladesh, because he had forced President Iajuddin to relinquish his position as the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government by producing a fake telegram from the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. What Brigadier (retd.) Fazlul Bari, who was the Deputy Director of the DGFI (Bangladesh's military intelligence) up to September 2008, told me he was the "first person" to approach the Army Chief General Moeen to convince President Iajuddin to declare a state of emergency in Bangladesh to save the country from a civil war, in early November 2006.⁵²

Now, PM Khaleda Zia's Principal Secretary Kamal Siddiqui provides the important link in the jigsaw puzzle about Gowher Rizvi's role in installing Hasina and her party to power with Indian support, by neutralizing the apparently overpowering Bangladeshi generals and their Western patrons. As Siddiqui goes: "A few months later [after the coup] Muhammad Yunus, along with Kamal Hossain, went to Delhi to plead the case of 1/11 regime with [Indian Prime Minister] Manmohan Singh. Their point was that the 1/11 government was most willing and able to uphold the interests of the Indian government in Dhaka, and that the Awami League should be sidelined. This I learnt from Gowher Rizvi, who was at that time rushing to Delhi from NY on behalf of Hasina to nullify the effort of Yunus and Kamal Hossain. He also told me that Pranab Mukherjee, then Indian Foreign Minister, had informed Hasina, and she, in turn, had requested Rizvi to proceed to Delhi and meet all his Congress [party] contacts, such as Salman Khurshid, Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and others. Later, he [Gowher] confirmed that he was able to convince the Congress High Command that the Awami League was their trusted friend, and could accomplish this job better."⁵³

In sum, 1/11 was the outcome of certain internal and external factors. The former may be classified as civil and military, and the latter as the dynamics of some superpowers' and regional powers' manoeuvring vis-à-vis Bangladesh. While the West, especially the US, was keen on establishing special relationships with India to influence the internal and external policies of Bangladesh by making India its most reliable friend in South Asia, India had its own prerogatives and agendas, which often did not synchronize with those of the US. After 9/11, in view of the growing Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh—while Pakistan and Afghanistan had already been infested with Islamist terrorists—the US was keen on a regime change in the country. The US believed that the BNP-Jamaat coalition government (2001–2006) was somehow responsible for the rise of Islamist extremism in Bangladesh. The US wanted a powerful and friendly India to "play the leading role in South Asia" to protect American interests across the region. President Bush Jr.'s Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wanted to resolve the problem of "failing states" in South Asia, including Bangladesh through India. She revealed this in an interview with an Indian journalist in March 2005:

When he was Candidate Bush, he was already talking about the importance of a rising India, a great democracy, a vibrant democracy, obviously now making itself known in the international economic circumstances. And so, given that, the United States has determined that this is going to be a very important relationship going forward and we're going to put whatever time we need into it, and we're putting a lot of time into it. We've achieved a lot There is more that we probably need to do on Bangladesh which is, I think, a place that is becoming quite troubling. So, in the region, there is a great deal that we can do. But I think we'll also see that also internationally, India—and globally, India will start to play more of a role.⁵⁴

If we understand the dynamics of the Indo-Western machinations to install the pro-Indian Awami League to power in Bangladesh—as evident from Condoleezza Rice's and Pranab Mukherjee's public assertions, cited above—we understand that most, if not all of the “terrorist attacks” in Bangladesh in 2004–2006 were quintessentially false flag operations to pave the way for the Awami League to come to power. No wonder, the party being not sure about its electoral success in the scheduled polls in early 2007, had forged an electoral alliance on 23 December 2006 with obscurantist Islamist party, the Khilafat Majlis, even by agreeing to implement Shariah law, “blasphemy law,” and mullahs' power to issue fatwas on religious issues in the country, just for the sake of coming to power.⁵⁵ As revealed by the WikiLeaks and cited above, the US Ambassador Butenis informed the State Department in December 2006 that while the Awami League was “ill prepared to contest in January,” the BNP was “the party to beat” because of its connection with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Thus, with the Indo-Western blessings, the Awami League won the parliamentary elections on 30 December with a thumping two-thirds majority, and Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister. During the twelve years since her second ascendancy to power in 2008 till March 2021 (the last month and year of the period under review, since March 1971) Hasina won two more rounds of elections, albeit thoroughly rigged ones, on 5 January 2014 and 30 December 2018.

In hindsight one may affirm the twelve years between 2008 and 2021 as the worst period in the history of Bangladesh with regard to the violations

of human rights, human dignity and freedom. Meanwhile, Bangladeshi intellectuals from the “Indo-Western Lobby”—which has been an amorphous group of members who conveniently change sides and ideologies—had been apparently looking for “honest and clean candidates in national politics.” Dr Yunus of the Grameen Bank, economist Rehman Sobhan, former Chief Justice Habibur Rahman, jurist Kamal Hossain, two national daily editors, Motiur Rahman and Mahfuz Anam, and economist Debapriya Bhattacharya had been leading among civil society members in quest of “honest and clean” leaders in early 2006. Days after the mysterious coup under General Moeen (whose Indian connections became evident in early 2008) or the so-called 1/11, on 18 February 2007, Dr Yunus formally announced the foundation of his political party, tentatively called the Nagorik Shakti (Citizens’ Power). However, after failing to get any worthwhile support among Bangladeshis, on 3 May 2007, Dr Yunus (a Nobel Laureate in Peace, 2006) dropped the idea of floating his political party.⁵⁶ Apparently, the stillbirth of Dr Yunus’s “political party” signalled the premature death of the Western venture, which had been sold as the “minus two” formula to get rid of both Khaleda and Hasina (and their parties). However, India still managed to install the party of her liking, the Awami League under Hasina, to power through the elections in December 2008.

Hasina’s Tyranny: Beyond One’s Wildest Dreams!

Apparently, Hasina was re-elected to power on 30 December 2008 through free and fair elections, but as we know, actually with the blessings of the Indo-US-British lobby and its allies at home and abroad—interestingly, soon after the elections, Awami League’s Secretary General Abdul Jalil publicly affirmed his party had come to power with a “deal” with the power brokers—so there was nothing called a smooth transition to civilian rule in the country. After manipulating the following two rounds of elections in 2014 and 2018, the Hasina regime further consolidated its position with direct intervention by some foreign powers. Thus, Hasina’s re-appearance to the corridor of power added some new dimensions to the overall governance process in the country, turning it much more autocratic—almost fascistic after her third round of victory in 2014—far more corrupt, coercive and subservient to India than ever before.

Soon after Hasina's second ascension to power in 2008, fifty-seven army officers—in command positions of the border security outfit, the BDR—were gunned down by its troops on 25/26 February 2009. Whatever were the motives behind this massacre, we are not sure, however, a report on the incident is rightly critical of gross mismanagement of the crisis by the Bangladesh government.⁵⁷ However, all the conspiracy theories about the incident have remained unsubstantiated. The trial of the 1975 coupmakers who overthrew the Mujib regime, which had begun in 1998, was complete during Hasina's second term. The trial itself was in violation of the Indemnity clause in the Constitution, which could not be legally changed by a single majority in the parliament. Most executions of the arrested ex-officers, including Farooq Rahman and Bazlul Huda took place in 2010. Then comes the least expected and abrupt arrests, trial and execution of several “war criminals,” mostly belonging to the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which came as a big surprise to everyone. Jamaat leaders like Ghulam Azam, Maulana AKM Yusuf, Motiur Rahman Nizami, Ali Ahsan Mujahid, Mir Quasem Ali, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, Maulana Abdus Sobhan and Abdul Quader Molla had been free and respectable citizens of the country, and some of them were elected members of the parliament and ministers in Mrs Zia's cabinet in 2001–2006. Azam, Nizami and Mujahid, among other Jamaat leaders, had been very close associates and even political allies of Hasina and her party from the 1980s to late 2000. BNP's former lawmaker Salahuddin Kader Chowdhury, another “war criminal,” had access to Sheikh Hasina's residence while she was the leader of the opposition in the parliament. Their elimination expedited Hasina's quest for absolute power, as she virtually broke the Jamaat's backbone, and substantially weakened the BNP.

The local and international media has given wide publication to the whole trial process. One may mention the infamous Skype Scandal, leaked by the *Economist* and umpteen number of other media outlets and social media in 2012, while the farcical International War Crime Tribunal was busy implicating dozens of opposition leaders and activists in alleged war crimes, committed in 1971. The real motive of the so-called trial of “war criminals” was self-explanatory in the leaked audio and emails exchanged between a Tribunal One judge Nizamul Huq and Ahmed Ziauddin, a pro-Hasina Bangladeshi lawyer based in Brussels. The *Economist* published the transcript of seventeen hours of conversations between the judge and a

Bangladeshi lawyer during 28 August to 20 October 2012, and more than 230 e-mails exchanged between them during September 2011 to September 2012. The *Economist* rightly suggested that the Bangladesh government had intervened into the Tribunal's work to influence the judgement in its favour. Ziauddin also advised prosecutors, including the Chief Prosecutor Zaed-al-Malum, and informed Huq about how the prosecutors may develop their cases. This resulted in a connection between the judge, adviser and the prosecution.⁵⁸

The following observation by the *Economist* on the nature of the so-called Tribunal is very revealing:

And in Mr Sayeedi's [an accused] case it points to the possibility that, even before the court had finished hearing testimony from the defence witnesses, Mr Nizamul [the judge] was already expecting a guilty verdict In a conversation of October 14th, between Mr Nizamul and Ahmed Ziauddin, the Brussels-based lawyer of Bangladeshi origin, the judge refers to the government as "absolutely crazy for a judgment. The government has gone totally mad. They have gone completely mad, I am telling you. They want a judgment by 16th December ... it's as simple as that."⁵⁹

This writer recalls a part of the Skype conversation. Justice Huq told Ziauddin: "The Prime Minister wants *laash* (dead body).... The Chief Public Prosecutor Zaed-al-Malum told me once: 'Sir, at times I will be disruptive in the court, behaving erratic during the Tribunal proceedings, and you will shut me up. People would think we are not linked to each other!'" Both Huq and Ziauddin burst into laughter. And, then the latter assured the former: "Don't worry Sir, I will write the judgement on behalf of you, in such a way that will help you execute several of these accused people." Soon, the *Economist* report was followed by its reproduction in Bengali by the Bengali daily *Amar Desh* on 9 December 2012. On 13 December, a court injunction banned Bangladeshi newspapers from publishing the materials. Meanwhile, the government proscribed the *Amar Desh*, and arrested and tortured Mahmudur Rahman. He was kept behind bars for several years, and afterwards on release he fled to Turkey and took political asylum there.⁶⁰

In sum, the Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were tried as “war criminals” on extremely flimsy grounds, such as their issuing newspaper statements or delivering public speeches vilifying the Bengali freedom fighters as “Indian agents” and “enemies of Islam and Pakistan” during the Liberation War in 1971. What the plaintiff (the Bangladesh government) totally ignored before bringing the charges against the defendants was that the Liberation War for Bangladesh was also a civil war between the pro- and anti-Pakistan people in erstwhile East Pakistan. And, as we know from the history of civil wars and Liberation Wars—from the American Civil War to the Liberation War of Vietnam—the victors did not imprison (let alone execute) the vanquished people for their role in the wars. Soldiers, militias and civilians fighting in a war or civil war cannot be just classified as war criminals, unless they really commit such crimes. And, most definitely, those who publicly give verbal or written support for the cause—irrespective of which side of the fence they are—are anything but war criminals, from any definition of the expression. Those who fought to liberate Bangladesh or to defend the national integrity of Pakistan in erstwhile East Pakistan were no exceptions, in this regard.

One must not lose sight of the fact that the plaintiff fabricated chargesheet documents and witnesses, and manipulated them. One Sukharanjan Bali may be cited in this regard. Originally, he was a prosecution witness to testify against Maulana Delwar Hossain Sayeedi of the Jamaat to incriminate him as a war criminal, but on his refusal to incriminate the accused, on 5 November 2012 he mysteriously disappeared from the court. Soon, he was found at the Dum Dum prison in Kolkata, for allegedly entering India illegally. According to the BBC Bengali, Bali sought political asylum in India.⁶¹ The trial of Salahuddin Kader Chowdhury was also grossly intransparent, hence biased against the accused. The court did not allow certain witnesses—including a sitting judge at the Dhaka High Court, a personal friend of the accused, to testify. One so-called witness, Professor Anisuzzaman’s testimony was as ridiculous as it could be! As this writer recalls the Professor telling the press in front of TV cameras after he was coming out of the court. He told the press that in his testimony to the judge he had told him (to paraphrase): “A former student of mine at Chittagong University told me he was an eyewitness to Salahuddin Kader Chowdhury’s shooting the Hindu owner of Shakti Aushadhalaya in Chittagong in 1971 with his gun, in front of

Pakistan Army troops.” Thus, it is not unfair to classify the Tribunal as a “kangaroo court” that committed several “extrajudicial killings.”

The trial of one Jamaat leader, Abdul Kader Molla, who is alleged to have raped a woman in Bangladesh during the Liberation War, was tried as a war criminal in 2013 and awarded life imprisonment. One girl who “witnessed” the rape (she was the sole “witness”) testified more than forty years after the incident. On being sentenced to life imprisonment instead of getting a death sentence (as expected), while leaving the courtroom in police custody, he gave a thumbs up sign wearing a smile on his face. Picture of this gesture by Molla came out in print and electronic media. This triggered a tremendous reaction among the people, mainly among the young generation. Soon they assembled at the Shahbagh Square (near Dhaka University) and demanded death penalty for “war criminal” Molla. Tens of thousands of people assembled day and night for a few weeks at Shahbagh Square, chanting “Death for Molla” and “Hang Molla Immediately” in May 2013. This demonstration led to the government making a drastic amendment to the War Crime Tribunal Act, which had no provision for any appeal against any judgement by the Tribunal either by the plaintiff or by any accused. The government amended the Act to make room for the provision of appeal. Accordingly, on government appeal, the Tribunal altered the previous judgement for life imprisonment for Molla, and sentenced him to death. Meanwhile, some Islamophobic bloggers had circulated filthy comments on the Prophet of Islam, the Early Caliphs and the religion of Islam in their blogs, in the filthiest and most vulgar language. Soon, these Islamophobic and blasphemous assertions provoked Islam-oriented people and thousands of madrasa students and teachers from Hathazari Chittagong and elsewhere in the country. Thousands of madrasa students and teachers, mostly from the Hathazari Madrasa in Chittagong, under the banner of a new Islamic platform called Hefazat-e-Islam, came to Dhaka and held another massive rally in the downtown demanding death for “blasphemers of Islam.” The Hefazat and Shahbagh rallies represented the two diametrically opposite streams. The former represented the avowedly Islamic stream, which is very sensitive about any blasphemy against Islam and its Prophet, and wanted to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic; and the latter represented a motley groups of liberal democrat, secular, agnostics and atheists committed to the secular Bengali nationalism. Thanks to government intervention the two groups could not

confront each other face to face. However, in the wee hours of 25 and 26 May 2013, armed law-enforcers (police and the Border Guards of Bangladesh or BGB troops) attacked the Hefazat-e-Islam supporters who were sleeping on pavements and corridors of office buildings near the Bangladesh Bank Headquarters at the Motijheel Commercial Area. There is no authentic account as to what happened and how many people got killed that night. Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, *Economist* and international human rights group and media reveal that the police and BGB troops killed around 60–300 Hefazat supporters on the spot.⁶² Graphic videos—which have become viral—of the massacre reveal a lot.

Meanwhile, the abolition of the provision of a caretaker government to hold national elections, from the Constitution by the Hasina government in 2011 signalled the regime's desire to manipulate election results to its benefit. In hindsight, one may assert this in view of the recurrence of massively rigged parliamentary elections in favour of the ruling Awami League of Hasina in 2014 and 2018. Rigging elections for the sake of power signals the death of democracy. In Bangladesh, it reflects the failure of the peasant and tribal mindset of people to appreciate and run democracy, as we know democracy cannot sustain anywhere where the people do not have mutual trust and respect. Most leaders belonging to the major political parties play a zero-sum game. Ourselves-or-none is the core of their political culture. To them, even the military is better than their political rivals. They abjure other viewpoints; identify national interests with their party; and “consider being out of power almost worse than death itself.” William Milam has rightly argued that elections held only under caretaker governments ensure relatively free and fair elections in Bangladesh.⁶³ However, Hasina abruptly abolished the provision of the caretaker government from the Constitution through the 15th Amendment on 30 June 2011. She argued that since the military-backed government under General Moeen Ahmed (2007–2008), in the name of running a caretaker government to hold free and fair elections held power for two years, instead of three months as specified in the Caretaker Government Act of 1996, there was no need to continue with it anymore.⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that Hasina and her political allies against the first BNP government under Khaleda Zia in 1991–1996, Ghulam Azam and Motiur Rahman Nizami of the Jamaat-e-Islami (whom Hasina later indicted as “war criminals”) who had been instrumental in enacting the Caretaker Government Act in 1996,

was done away with by Hasina's government. Last but not least, sixteen months after his retirement, in 2012 retired Chief Justice Khairul Haque made some amendments to the judgement that had nullified the Caretaker Government Act in June 2011, which the then Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha opined was "illegal."⁶⁵

The next important milestone in modern Bangladesh was the farcical parliamentary elections on 5 January 2014. After Hasina's manipulative and extra-legal removal of the caretaker government clause from the Constitution in 2011, the parliamentary elections in 2014 were marred by the massive boycott of the polls by majority party and even independent candidates, including the erstwhile ally of Hasina's Awami League, the Jatiya Party of General Ershad. Local and international observers believed Hasina's Awami League was most likely to be a loser in the elections. According to the *Economist*, there was "the growing chances of the League's defeat in elections due by next January Ever since, the BNP has been in the ascendant. It thrashed the League in mayoral elections in June and July, notably in Gazipur in the industrial belt, hitherto one of the League's safest constituencies."⁶⁶ However, thanks to the Indian government's direct/naked intervention, the ruling party got 153 of its candidates elected uncontested out of the total 300. Apparently, it was legal, but all the major opposition parties vehemently contested this arbitrary decision by the Awami League government. Meanwhile, the country had gone through weeks of violent street protests, bomb and molotov cocktail attacks on people, vehicles and properties, allegedly by the BNP and its allies. Even the former Prime Minister and BNP Chief was implicated in a firebomb attack on a bus at ChaudaGram, a small town around 130 kilometres off Dhaka city.⁶⁷ One of the charges against Khaleda, which has kept her under detention, as of late March 2021 since early 2018. Interestingly, there has been multiple documentary evidence suggesting that actually Hasina's supporters, not Khaleda's, were setting fire to vehicles and killing people with fire-bombs in Dhaka and elsewhere, in the name of BNP and its allies. Surprisingly enough, the day after the farcical polls on 5 January 2014, there was not a single fire-bomb attack, anywhere across Bangladesh, although the losing parties had even more reasons to be violent after the elections had re-installed the ruling Awami League to power!⁶⁸ According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, both the opposition and ruling parties resorted to violent attacks, and the police, RAB and Border

Guards (BGB) troops killed scores of people in the name of “cross fire” during the months’ long pre-poll violence. Many of the victims were BNP-Jamaat -e-Islami workers.⁶⁹ Incidentally, one pro-Hasina bus owner later publicly confessed that he himself had set fire to a bus of his own transport company to implicate the opposition parties in fire-bomb attacks on the eve of the 2014 parliamentary elections. His video-statement became viral in social media.

As the 2008 elections that installed Hasina to power through the Indian-backed military-led “caretaker government,” similarly, the fate of the 2014 polls—which all the Bangladeshi opposition parties had boycotted (no independent candidate won any seat either)—was decided in New Delhi, as well. The day before the polls, on 4 January 2014, Sujatha Singh, India’s Secretary for External Affairs, came to Dhaka and virtually coerced General (retd.) Ershad, the Chief of the Jatiya Party into submission. He had to file his nomination papers and was declared elected “uncontested.” Most importantly, Ershad had earlier publicly declared his firm decision in favour of boycotting the elections, and he had even said he would commit suicide rather than participating in the farcical elections. In other words, Sujatha Singh had her *veni, vidi, vici* moment in Bangladesh! Not only Ershad submitted himself to her will by participating in the farcical elections and becoming the “tame” leader of the opposition to legitimize the illegitimate Hasina Regime, but India also took another big step towards bringing Bangladesh under its full control as a client state.

Ambassador Serajul Islam has quite aptly summed up the story:

The Indian foreign secretary met HM Ershad in his residence and without mincing words and unbelievably undiplomatically told him that the Jatiya Party must take part in the elections in order to keep the BNP/Jamaat from coming to power! That was the most blatant example of any country interfering in another country’s internal affairs. Ershad exposed the attempted interference by the Indian foreign secretary in a dramatic way. No sooner had she left his residence, he held an impromptu press briefing and reproduced almost verbatim what transpired at the meeting.⁷⁰

“Ershad, after meeting Sujatha Singh, told the press that she apparently expressed concern that if he did not go to polls the fundamentalist Jamaat-

Shibir would rise and come to power,” yet another retired Bangladeshi ambassador Mahmood Hasan puts it mildly. Then he quips: “Why did she tell Ershad that Jamaat-Shibir will come to power? How did she know that JP’s skipping the polls will lead to such an eventuality?” The Ambassador, here, implicitly affirms what else India wants to see in Bangladesh but an India-friendly Awami League to power!⁷¹ And, what followed this farcical election was unprecedented. Not only Hasina formed government—without holding a fresh round of elections as promised by her that the 5 January polls were just a “constitutional requirement”—but she made Ershad as the leader of the opposition in the parliament, and at the same time, a few of his party members also became ministers in the Hasina cabinet. Hasina further rewarded Ershad for his enforced submission to her will through India. She made him a roving ambassador of Bangladesh, with the rank of a cabinet minister. In hindsight it is evident that Hasina went through the dubious process to install herself to power as various intelligence reports had predicted a disastrous defeat for Hasina and her party. The *Economist* had also come up with a succinct report on the most likely defeat of the ruling Awami League in the following elections in early 2014.⁷² After this farcical electoral victory, Hasina has not looked back. Meanwhile she had hanged all the top leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami, as “war criminals” through the controversial War Crime Tribunal. Before the next round of elections were due in late 2018 or early 2015, she had virtually become a dictator.

Although no unbiased and sensible person can ever call the 2018 elections anything but the most blatantly rigged ones in history. “It was a disgraceful mockery of elections by the government under police and RAB protection,” observed some leaders of an opposition party.⁷³ Some local media poll observers gave horrid pictures of vote rigging from different corners of the country. One report reveals fifteen minutes after the polling had started at a polling centre at Barisal town, it ran out of ballot papers as Awami League workers stuffed ballot boxes with sealed ballot papers to favour the ruling party, and no opposition polling agents were allowed in.⁷⁴ The story was more or less the same everywhere across the country. At some polling centres opposition polling agents were beaten up by AL workers.⁷⁵ Interestingly, Hasan Maruf Rumi, an opposition candidate (in the Chittagong 10 constituency) did not receive a single vote, not even his own vote!⁷⁶ According to a report by the Transparency International Bangladesh, “Electoral irregularities like stamping ballot papers the night

before the polls and ballot stuffing by capturing booths on the election day took place in forty-seven out of fifty constituencies surveyed.”⁷⁷ Two opposition candidates, Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan (BNP) and Major General (retd.) Muhammad Ibrahim (Bangladesh Kalyan Party), in personal communication to this writer told him as to how the ruling AL workers with the help of law-enforcers had stuffed ballot boxes night before the elections and had not allowed their polling agents to enter the polling centres. Ibrahim’s YouTube video, dated 2 January 2019, is self-explanatory. Keeping in view the 2018 elections, Ali Riaz has given a good account of as to how and why Bangladesh has come under the grip of a “hybrid regime” since 2014.⁷⁸

Not only local media (which still enjoyed some freedom immediately before and after the elections), but foreign media, analysts and poll observers put it most unambiguously that the elections were grossly rigged and Bangladesh was no longer a democracy. While the *Economist Intelligence* convincingly argued on 9 January 2019 that Bangladesh was “no longer a democracy.”⁷⁹ William Milam believes that Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League (AL) won 97.66 per cent of the seats in the parliament “by pulling every dirty trick in the election stealer’s handbook,” and that “the AL became a one-party government in 2014.” He thinks Hasina’s “message is Orwellian—that the government can declare its own truth as much as it wants And the real truth is that the election was stolen and the government is illegitimate.”⁸⁰ Indian journalist Chandan Nandy of the *South Asia Monitor* was a poll monitor in the December 2018 polls. His tweet is self-explanatory about the intensity of the rigging process: “The Awami League’s vote rigging apparatus was so completely successful that even the RAW station head in Dhaka, Shashi Bhusahan Singh Tomar, was stunned by the outcome, even though he was an integral part of the machination.”⁸¹ Nandy’s tweet unambiguously establishes that although the RAW was “an integral part of the machination” (poll rigging in the country), yet, even its “station head in Dhaka” was stunned by the outcome of the rigged polls. Again, Norbert Rottgen, Chair of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee in Germany in his tweet message registered his disappointment at the fraudulent elections of 2018: “I am shocked by the extent of election fraud seen in Bangladesh! The country is effectively turned into a single-party system. European governments should stand firm in condemning the election procedure thereby showing support for

Bangladesh's remaining democratic forces.”⁸² The whole election process and outcome were so disgusting that while the *Economist* writes, “BNP is not the biggest loser but democracy in Bangladesh,” CNN calls the polls “a disputed election and a dangerous new era for Bangladesh” and Michael Kugelman of the Woodrow Wilson Center calls the polling exercise “a selection rather than an election.”⁸³

BBC on a live TV showed on the polling day, while tens of thousands of voters were queuing up outside polling stations, ruling-party workers were busy stuffing ballot boxes with fake votes behind closed doors.⁸⁴ As one poll observer reports, “the electoral playing-field was so tilted, the voting so deeply flawed and the counting so lacking in transparency that even many of the [ruling] party’s supporters doubt the result.”⁸⁵ The same report points out the ruling Awami League’s “wholesale takeover of state institutions,” and “unaccountable” police and prosecutors’ harassment of BNP members with arrests and lawsuits. Around 10,000 BNP workers were arrested before the elections, and the party was not allowed to hold rallies, and its website was shut down, affirms the report. It also reveals that out of some 40,000 polling booths across the country, BNP was not allowed to have any polling agents (as required by law) and “ballot boxes looked suspiciously full” even before the poll started. Most polling booths were closed “for lunch” or because “ballots ran out.” In Hasina’s constituency “the margin of victory was more than 1,000:1.” “In several others, opposition candidates failed to garner a single vote—not even their own.”⁸⁶ While Ravina Shamdasni of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights registered her concern about violence and alleged human rights violations in Bangladesh from Geneva, the *Time* magazine thought Hasina won the elections by “voter suppression”; the *New York Times* called the vote “farcical” and reminded Hasina that human rights were “not an imposition of an alien culture, but a critical element of development and progress.”⁸⁷

In view of the above documentary evidences, it is not an over-statement that Bangladesh since the Indian-sponsored ascendancy of the Awami League to power under Hasina’s leadership in December 2008 has become the safe haven for pro-government corrupt and criminal elements, who, as of 26 March 2021 (on the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh) have plundered billions of dollars from the public sector, banks and individuals; killed, raped, abducted and tortured political dissidents and others with impunity, with direct support from corrupt ministers, law-enforcers, bureaucrats and

judiciary. The magnitude of the problem is so enormous that one needs multiple volumes to give a comprehensive account of it. One may classify the problems into the following categories, and barely indicate a few tips of the mega iceberg of coercion and corruption under the Hasina Regime. In sum, although there is nothing new about vote rigging in Bangladesh since its emergence, yet, previously no ruling-party leader ever publicly advised party workers to intimidate opposition voters and candidates to rig elections. Seemingly, a new trend has evolved since the fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2018. Just days before the elections, scores of senior Awami League leaders like Kazi Zafrullah and Lotus Kamal publicly asked their supporters (videos of their speeches became viral on social media) not to allow any opposition voters, polling agents and candidates in close proximity to the polling stations. And, advised them to physically attack opposition supporters, assuring them not to worry about anything, as they (leaders) would take care of the consequences. Ever since the rigged polls of 2018, intimidating opposition supporters and rigging elections with impunity have become the trend across the country, even at local council and mayoral elections. On 9 February 2021, Bangladesh Awami Women's League's General Secretary Mahmuda Begum publicly told Awami League workers at Thakurgaon (a northern district town) to kick out all BNP voters from the locality, on the eve of a local council election. The video of her speech became viral and no disciplinary action was taken against her.⁸⁸ Yet another local Awami League leader at Gabtoli in Bogura district publicly threatened BNP voters about the consequences of trying to enter any polling station on the local council election day.⁸⁹

Coercion, Corruption, Development and the State of Impunity

As there are overwhelming proofs about the three consecutive elections between 2008 and 2018 that elected Hasina to power were rigged, farcical and grossly rigged, so are there conclusive evidences about the coercive, corrupt and unaccountable nature of the Hasina regime since 2009. Enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, unbridled corruption, strict censorship of media, the lack of freedom of expression and the unaccountable governance have been the main characteristics of the regime.

Enforced disappearance and extra-judicial killing of dissidents and rivals—which were in their infancy during the Mujib era—have grown up exponentially under Hasina. So much so that various international human rights organizations, government agencies and individuals have been publicly condemning her regime for such violations of human rights in the country.

There are a few examples of enforced disappearances, where the “fortunate” abductees returned home after days, months and more than year. These are just a tiny tip of the iceberg. Hundreds have disappeared since 2009. In March 2015, law-enforcers abducted a senior BNP leader, Salahuddin and two months later he reappeared in Shillong (Meghalaya), India.⁹⁰ Ghulam Azam’s son Brigadier General (retd.) Abdullah-il Aman al-Azmi is missing. Around thirty plain-clothed armed men picked him up blindfolded on 22 August 2016. In 2009, Azmi, who was a brilliant army officer (a recipient of the Sword of Honour at the Bangladesh Military Academy) was forcibly retired from the Army without any benefit, presumably, as desired by Prime Minister Hasina. Seemingly, his only “fault” was his father was a “war criminal,” convicted by the controversial Tribunal on trumped up charges. Ilias Ali, another renowned BNP leader, disappeared in 2012.⁹¹ As of 31 December, Ilias Ali, Salahuddin and Aman al-Azmi were missing.

Purportedly, on 4 December 2017, law-enforcers abducted Ambassador (retd.) Maroof Zaman and returned him after 467 days. As of March 2021, he never told anything in public about what had happened to him during his mysterious absence for 467 days, who had abducted him and why.⁹² Renowned poet, writer and human rights activist Farhad Mazhar was yet another victim of abduction by law-enforcers, who abducted him early morning from outside his home, and was missing for a few days until he was found near the India-Bangladesh border. Since his returning home, he has also kept his mouth shut about what had happened to him during his days of mysterious disappearance.⁹³

The International Federation for Human Rights, the second-oldest international human rights group, published a report in April 2019, titled *Vanished Without a Trace: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh*, which cited 507 such cases between 2009 and 2018, covering the ruling party’s back-to-back terms in office. Among them, 286 returned and 62 were found dead, but 159 still remain missing. The report

says the cases indicate the involvement of the police and the Rapid Action Battalion. The Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a Dhaka-based legal aid and human rights organization, also offered similar figures in their data collected between 2013 and 2019.⁹⁴ This writer personally knows one abductee (who wants anonymity for security reasons), a professor of a private university in Dhaka, who also disappeared for a few months, came back, and as expected, did not open his mouth about what had happened to him. He later took asylum in Australia.

After pro-BNP daily *Amar Desh* (which has been proscribed by the government) editor Mahmudur Rahman's arbitrary arrest and brutal torture in police custody for over five years for publishing certain unpalatable truths for the regime, the latest case of police brutality against a journalist took place at Chittagong on 1 November 2020. Golam Sarwar, who works for a local news portal in Chittagong, was abducted after he had published an article about the alleged involvement of a minister's family in land grabbing in the locality.⁹⁵ Although there is nothing new about extra-judicial killing in Bangladesh, it became normative after the Khaleda government in 2004 had introduced a special "killing squad" called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). "Crossfire" is the innuendo for extrajudicial killing of suspects, criminals and even innocent people (having anti-government views) in Bangladesh. By 2010, according to the then RAB Chief, the outfit had killed 622 people since its inception in 2004. According to Odhikar, a human rights organization in the country, "at least 1,169" fell victim to "crossfire" between 2009 and 2016. In June 2016 alone, the RAB killed twenty-four people. Between January and June 2016, police killed seventy-nine people in custody. The police killed 130 drug dealers in two years.⁹⁶ The RAB and police under the Hasina administration had earned such notoriety for extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances of political dissidents that on 29 October 2020, ten US senators wrote a bipartisan letter to the erstwhile Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Treasury Mnuchin to take some punitive measures against Bangladesh to stop all extra-judicial killings in the country. The letter mentioned that RAB "reportedly killed more than 400 people extrajudicially since 2015." "Extrajudicial killings by the RAB have reportedly spiked since the Government of Bangladesh began its 'war on drugs' in the months ahead of the December 2018 elections," the Senators wrote.⁹⁷ "The Rapid Action Battalion is accused of extrajudicial killings

and torture of hundreds of civilians. Documents show they purchased Cellebrite's phone-hacking tech and received training Israeli phone-hacking firm Cellebrite sold its technology to Bangladesh's notorious paramilitary unit, documents reveal, reports an Israeli daily."⁹⁸ As of late 2019, around 200,000 criminal cases had been filed against BNP leaders and supporters (since 2009), and about 100,000 opposition supporters were in jail, reveals a BNP leader and a former minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury.⁹⁹ In late December 2020, seven Asian human rights agencies have condemned the Hasina administration for human rights violations in Bangladesh.¹⁰⁰

Yet after another custodial death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed on 25 February 2021, who had been brutally tortured to death by police, thirteen OECD country ambassadors issued a joint-statement against the Hasina Regime's human rights violations. Registering their concern at the custodial death of one Mushtaq Ahmed (who was a writer and satirist), the ambassadors wrote: "We call on the Government of Bangladesh to conduct a swift, transparent and independent inquiry into the full circumstances of Mr. Mushtaq Ahmed's death. We will continue to engage with the Government of Bangladesh on our Governments' wider concerns about the provisions and implementation of the DSA [Digital Security Act, a draconian censorship act] as well as questions about its compatibility with Bangladesh's obligations under international human rights laws and standards."¹⁰¹ The *New York Times* has also published a piece condemning the DSA and custodial-deaths in the country. It believes: "The death of Mushtaq Ahmed has renewed alarm about the country's use of a draconian digital security law to crack down on dissent."¹⁰² So many human rights organizations, mainly abroad, have been condemning the Hasina regime for its abysmally poor human rights record in the past few years. However, as we know, media control is vital for autocracy, especially for a corrupt one like Fujimori's one in Peru, and Hasina's one in Bangladesh. Fujimori, like Hasina, "built a corrupt regime and rule through repression and bribery."¹⁰³ In China, as one Chinese commentator affirms, "To uphold the leadership of the Party in political reform, three principles must be followed: that the Party controls the armed forces; the Party controls cadres; and the Party controls the news."¹⁰⁴ In sum, the above discussion on the rigged and farcical elections, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and strict

censorship gives us a fair idea of the nature of autocracy—which is proto-fascistic from any definition of the expression—under Hasina. So much so, because despite touching the tips of the iceberg, the evidences are overpowering to leave any room for doubts or scepticism.

Meanwhile, several developments had taken place before the country turned totalitarian during 2009–2018. One may mention the following: the share-market scandals by some known close associates of Prime Minister Hasina since 2009; bad debts to the tune of multiple billions in US dollars; growing educated unemployment, which is around 40 per cent in 2021; illegal foreign workers (mostly Indians) have been remitting billions of US dollars to India and elsewhere from Bangladesh; influential Bangladeshis have been running away from the country with billions of dollars to Malaysia, Singapore, the UK, Switzerland, Canada and among other places, to the US; forced abduction, disappearance and killing of opposition lawmakers, activists, newspaper editors, writers and human rights activists since 2009; holding of three rounds of parliamentary elections in 2009, 2014 and 2018, which were moderately rigged, farcical and thoroughly rigged, respectively; illegal detention of thousands of BNP activists, leaders, including a former Prime Minister and the party Chief Khaleda Zia on trumped up charges. Hasina even did not spare the Supreme Court Chief Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha for giving an unpalatable judgement in 2017. He had to flee the country and take political asylum in Canada.¹⁰⁵ He told this writer that Hasina had literally kicked him in presence of the President of the Republic and the Law Minister at the President's House. Other atrocious acts of the Regime include: closing down of opposition newspapers and TV channels; establishing dozens of coal-run power stations, one in close proximity to the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world; granting undue advantages to India, especially transit facilities between the Indian state of Paschim Banga and the landlocked states of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura through Bangladesh territory; allowing India to use Chittagong and Mongla sea ports free of cost; and the government's inability to get its due share of the Teesta waters from India.

Now, one may look at the level of development that Bangladesh is said to have reached in the past few decades, which among others, the World Bank, Nikkei Asian Review, the *Economist*, and a few more overseas experts and analysts have praised Bangladesh's attaining high GDP growth rate and per capita income, which are, however, sometimes very

misleading. While the intensity of absolute poverty in Bangladesh is much higher than what foreign and Bangladesh government agencies project, the Nikkei Asian Review's report, "The Rise and Rise of Bangladesh" in December 2018 is as faulty as some of the postings by the *Economist* on Bangladesh economy in recent years. Nikkei even cited the Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina who said: "In the next five years, we expect annual growth to exceed 9% and, we hope, get us to 10% by 2021."¹⁰⁶ Had GDP growth been the main criterion of economic development of a country, then Ethiopia at 8.8 per cent in 2018 and Syria at 9.9 per cent in 2019 would have been on the top of the pyramid today.

Ever since Hasina's re-emergence to the corridors of power in Bangladesh in 2009, the country has broken all previous records in the sheer magnitude, levels and extent of corruption, which hitherto were well beyond people's wildest imagination. It is simply mindboggling the way ridiculously inflated government expenditures on purchasing materials, furniture, computers, spare parts of machines, government vehicles and materials purchased for regular maintenance of government offices, hospitals, educational institutions; or expenditure on construction of buildings, roads, highways, bridges, railway tracks; or anything various government departments spend money on in the country. Mere cataloguing these irregularities (which one frequently comes across in media reports) would require a separate study. Nearly a billion US dollars were siphoned out of the State Bank in 2016. Top political figures and Indian hands are suspected. In the name of "development," money worth billions of US dollars is being pilferage. The GFI also estimates an average of US\$7.53 billion is laundered out of the country every year. On the other hand, thousands of Bangladeshis in search of economic benefits land in foreign concentration camps or drown in the high seas. "In 2014, Beximco, one of the politically connected business groups, asked for a rescheduling of its nonperforming loans, amounting to \$700 million. Restructuring of \$130 million was immediately granted by Sonali Bank and \$240 million by Janata Bank. Not only was Beximco granted a two-year grace period but also 2–3 per cent interest rate reduction. Another nine politically connected business groups were also granted loan-rescheduling equivalent to \$1.8 billion," observes Mushtaq Khan.¹⁰⁷ Not only ministers, politicians, police, bureaucrats and businessmen are corrupt to the bone, but top brasses in the armed forces are also not immune to the vice. On 1 February 2021,

the Al Jazeera TV produced a documentary titled, “All the Prime Minister’s Men,” on the extent of corruption in Bangladesh. It revealed Hasina’s Army Chief General Aziz Ahmed having close ties with his absconding criminal/murder brothers based in Hungary and Malaysia. Among other misdeeds by the General, his brothers, Hasina herself and her ministers, the documentary revealed how criminals having links with the Prime Minister and the Army Chief extract lucrative perks from state contracts, and take “20 per cent” commission from all illegal transactions.¹⁰⁸

Whither the Legacy of the Battling Begums

A portrayal of the “Battling Begums” by a close associate of Hasina’s is very instructive. Soon after the election of Khaleda Zia as Prime Minister, Gowher Rizvi, who as of March 2021 is Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s External Affairs Adviser, wrote a piece in 1991, which is full of praise for Khaleda, BNP, and is a bit critical of Hasina’s rhetoric and leadership style. He portrays Hasina as “Awami League’s best asset and greatest liability,” and believes her responsibility for the defeat was “inescapable.” To him, “her real problem arises from her inability to strike a working relationship with the senior leaders of the party.” Contrary to what Hasina and her party people think of Mujib and Zia today, Rizvi thinks, “to the majority of the voters under 30, Mujib is a figure from the distant past,” and Zia is “the charismatic hero of the liberation war.” Rizvi believes, many consider Hasina as “vindictive” for her determination to try the assassins of her father, and for her “implicit insinuation” of Zia’s involvement in the killing of Mujib. “Many of the voters (including the well-informed urban intelligentsia) were convinced that under an AL government the country would be reduced to an Indian province,” he affirms. He attributes BNP’s victory to “the most important single factor,” that “was Khaleda Zia’s image,” as unlike Hasina she never participated in any election held while Ershad was in power.¹⁰⁹ Dr Kamal Hussain, renowned jurist and a former minister in the Mujib cabinet, who was also, sort of a mentor to Hasina, after she had formally entered the arena of politics in early 1980s, had similar views on Khaleda Zia’s electoral victory. Interestingly, Hasina never conceded the elections, and attributed Khaleda’s victory to no other factors but “subtle rigging.”

Khaleda's two terms as Prime Minister were not without hiccups and flaws. The first term of her official tenure (1991–1996) saw her appoint her older sister as a cabinet minister, and her second term (2001–2006) saw her son Tariq run "Hawa Bhaban," a shadow government to run the country. Following these precedents, Hasina appointed members of her family as ministers and advisers (including her son, Sajib Wazed Joy), tarnishing the image of Bangladesh as a dysfunctional democracy. In terms of governance, Khaleda's first term in office was better than her second. There were no major issues during her administration between 1991 and 1996, except for the controversial by-election at Magura (a district in the southwest) in March 1994, which is alleged to have been rigged in favour of the BNP candidate. In her second term in office, she took a series of disastrous decisions. In collusion with Pakistan, the Khaleda administration is believed to have armed the separatist United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in India. In Bangladesh, Paresh Barua and Anup Chetia, among other ULFA leaders, found refuge under her government.

The 2004 seizure by Chittagong police of ten trucks laden with arms (destined to be shipped to ULFA insurgents in Assam) was very embarrassing for the Khaleda administration. It also estranged India from the BNP government, and from then on India leaned towards the Awami League, Khaleda's main opposition party under Hasina. So much so that it is widely believed that India played a large role in the successive victories of the Awami League in national elections since 2008. In 2004, the Khaleda administration had antagonized China by openly allowing Taiwan to open a trade mission and a visa office in Dhaka. As a result, the BNP managed to alienate and isolate two of Bangladesh's most powerful neighbours, India and China. At a rally of the Awami League in downtown Dhaka on 21 August 2004, there was a grenade attack that killed twenty-four Hasina supporters, including prominent leader Ivy Rahman. Hasina narrowly escaped death that day. The attack was thought to be a terrorist attack by ULFA activists, but for reasons unclear, Khaleda's Home Minister Lutfuzzaman Babar misled law police by falsely implicating a villager, Joj Mia (who was poor). Besides these follies, in 2005 the BNP government miserably failed to pre-empt some terror attacks by home-grown Islamist terror organizations, the JMB and HUJI. Although later it was able to arrest and punish the top leaders of the groups, it initially denied that any Islamist terror groups existed in Bangladesh. Khaleda's government, in 2004,

created a death squad known as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which has been abducting, killing and making enforced disappearances of criminals and political opponents. Under the Hasina administration, the RAB has made around 600 enforced disappearances of political opponents since 2009.

Soon, the politics of the “Battling Begums” completely vitiated the arena of politics, and polarized the entire polity by converting political rivals into arch political enemies. The overwhelming majority of supporters of the two “Begums” do not respect and trust each other. So much so that they can go to any extent to denigrate, demonize, harm, and even kill each other out of sheer political vengeance. However, the main reason of such wild behaviour—not being ideological at all—is all about plundering national wealth with impunity. Traditionally, ruling-party leaders and activists get the lion share of the plunder. This has become the tradition since the Liberation in 1971, and is now integral to the political culture of Bangladeshis at large. They have hardly any qualms about this, as the popular culture of the people legitimizes lying, slandering each other, and accumulating wealth by unethical means. In this backdrop, let us appraise the successive regimes of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, as Prime Minister. As of March 2021, Bangladesh has not been able to come out of the vicious cycle of the family feud between the two Begums, which seemingly, has become the main problem of the over-polarized polity. In sum, while the two terms of the Khaleda administration were not the epitome of good governance and democracy, nevertheless, despite having most textbook examples of bad governance, the one run by Khaleda was head and shoulder above the one Hasina has been running since 2009—to put it mildly—which is a corrupt, one-party dictatorship, with no freedom of expression and human rights.

As of late 2021, while the polity of Bangladesh is more or less depoliticized under the unelected autocratic Hasina regime (since 2009), the Indians are virtually running the show through compliant politicians, and neutralized armed forces, police and bureaucracy. Analysts and observers, who are in safe havens outside Bangladesh, have been critical of the Indian-sponsored regime in the country. One notices their presence in the social media, especially on FaceBook and YouTube. Foreign analysts, journalists, media outlets like Al Jazeera TV and human rights activists have also been exposing the state of tyranny under Hasina. While the Amnesty

International believes the main purpose of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA), enacted in 2018, is to silence dissenting voice against the regime, and the UN Human Rights Commission wanted to know the whereabouts of thirty-four “disappeared” people (abducted by law-enforcers) from the Hasina administration, and the US-based Coalition of Human Rights & Democracy in Bangladesh pointed out in August 2021 the deplorable violations of human rights in the country,¹¹⁰ the RSF or Journalists Without Borders in a report in July 2021 puts the country in 152nd position out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, and calls Prime Minister Hasina a “predator” because of the DSA. It has empowered law-enforcers to arrest, torture and even make dissidents “disappear,” with complete impunity, and on a regular basis. The report concludes:

*The supporters of Sheikh Hasina’s party, the Awami League , and its student branch, the Chhatra League, serve as her enforcers in the field, harassing and attacking reporters to prevent them from covering streets protests or any form of unrest, especially during elections, sometimes acting as virtual lynch mobs. Journalists often end up in hospital and, in some cases, in the morgue. [Emphasis added]*¹¹¹

It is distressing that one UN report by its Human Rights Watch reveals on 16 August 2021 that eighty-six victims of enforced disappearances are missing in Bangladesh.¹¹² What is even more distressing is Sheikh Hasina’s son Sajeeb Wazed Joy’s dismissing all reports of enforced disappearances in the country. He writes in an op-ed in May 2018: “Many of the ‘disappeared’ are leaders of the opposition who are accusing the government of kidnapping them while they are, in fact, trying to avoid arrest by disappearing Some of the ‘disappearances’ are almost comical.” The *Economist* reveals that around 600 people have become victims of enforced disappearances in the country since Hasina came to power in 2009. Afroja Islam Akhi, sister of a victim, who runs Mayer Dak, “an organisation for the families of vanished Bangladeshis” reckons the number of disappeared is far higher than the 600 known about. She says “Only God knows the accurate tally.” Carolyn Nash, in her piece, “On Day of Disappeared US Has Eyes on Bangladesh” in the *Diplomat* (September 02, 2021) has

mentioned The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the US held a hearing on increasing use of enforced disappearance to silence dissent, undermine independent media and intimidate human rights advocates in Bangladesh. “Bangladesh has seen an intensifying wave of state repression in recent years” she affirms. She mentions the UN Human Rights Commission’s recent criticism of the Hasina government for their “persistent refusal to investigate enforced disappearances and hold perpetrators accountable.”¹¹³

In addition, it is unclear what legacy the “Battling Begums” will leave behind. As much as the Hasina Regime appears strong, it faces many internal and external problems as well as growing unpopularity among the entire population, particularly the unemployed youth, shopkeepers and rickshaw pullers hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. As of early November 2021, Bangladesh’s BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) reported that 32.45 million people had fallen into absolute poverty.¹¹⁴ Hasina had also been defensive since Narendra Modi’s controversial visit to Bangladesh in March 2021 to mark the 50th anniversary of the country’s independence, which led to countrywide protests and the Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh rally, which led to twenty deaths.¹¹⁵ The simmering discontent of the people has prompted the Hasina government to take more preventive and retaliatory measures. There had been no remission by November 2021 in mass arrests of dissidents and even their family members, as well as brutal violence by ruling Awami League activists against potential dissidents in Bangladesh. As reported by Bangladeshi media, ruling-party activists publicly threatened opposition candidates and supporters not to vote for opposition candidates before the local council elections on 11 November. If they did, dire consequences would follow!¹¹⁶

Ambassador Milam’s appraisal of dysfunctional Bangladesh in the post-Ershad period is instructive:

Bangladeshi political leaders and parties demonstrated vividly how, through bad governance and unconstructive and disloyal opposition, to undercut what should have been promising democratic development. Sixteen years of electoral democracy left the nation, politically, about where it was in 1991. In terms of political development, it is back to square one Each election generated

more heat than light as both major parties sought to undercut each other and gain the upper hand The leaders of both major parties, intent on winning at all costs, steered a suicidal, all-or-nothing course, resisting every entreaty and temptation to compromise.¹¹⁷

An NGO promoting human rights and democracy in Bangladesh more or less confirms this:

As the regime cannot reach the political dissidents living abroad, it goes for their innocent relatives in the country. Harassment, arrest, torture and jail terms for them are in the routine works of its fearsome Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and police. Fake charges under the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) are instantly stamped. A few succumbed to the police brutalities. The vast majority remain silent for fear of their lives. In October 2020, a bipartisan [US] Congressional Committee recommended sanction against the RAB, which committed hundreds of extrajudicial murders and enforced disappearances in Bangladesh.¹¹⁸

Based on these circumstances, it seems that there were no significant changes in the Hasina administration in the 50th year of Bangladesh's emergence. As before, it was still autocratic, corrupt, inefficient and oppressive towards dissidents and the common people in significant ways. While BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia was under house arrest and despite her serious illness was not allowed to leave the country for treatment, Hasina's law-enforcers abducted, killed and forcibly disappeared political dissidents and others. In Bangladesh, human rights abuses became so severe that the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions against several law-enforcers on 10 December 2021. As a result, OFAC designated six senior law enforcement officials working for the police and RAB, including the current Police Chief Benazir Ahmed as *personas non grata* in the US, who would not only be prohibited from visiting the US but if they owned any property in the US, it would be confiscated. One may surmise that the blacklisting of human rights violators in Bangladesh is also indirect retaliation against China, a warning to the Hasina Regime about the danger of too close a relationship with China, and a not-so-subtle effort to pressure the Hasina Regime to join

the US-led Quad to intimidate China.¹¹⁹ Later Bangladeshi media reported that the US had also revoked the visa of the former Army Chief General (retd.) Aziz Ahmed, who retired in June 2021. The US State Department refused to comment on his visa as “Visa records are confidential under U.S. Law,” it affirmed.¹²⁰

The allegations made by OFAC against Bangladeshi law enforcement go as follows:

Widespread allegations of serious human rights abuse in Bangladesh by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—as part of the Bangladeshi government’s war on drugs—threaten U.S. national security interests by undermining the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the economic prosperity of the people of Bangladesh.¹²¹

Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abdul Momen dismissed the Biden administration’s decision not to invite Bangladesh to the virtual Democracy Summit (held on 9 and 10 December 2021) with a not-so-convincing argument, namely that only countries with weak democratic institutions were invited to the summit! Furthermore, he has reacted unabashedly to the sanctions: “There have been only 600 extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh in the past ten years.”¹²²

Therefore, one may ask: Will Hasina be able to afford the OFAC sanctions? Does not she seem to be stuck in a bind? It is as if she is facing an existential crisis. She cannot appease both the US and China. India, the giant of South Asia and practically a hegemon over Bangladesh, sides with the US in this matter. Can Bangladesh keep India and China in good humour? Maybe a positive “No” is the right answer. Unanswered is another important question: Can Bangladesh afford to borrow billions of dollars from China at about 13 per cent interest? This diplomatic disorder has been caused by the unscrupulous hedonism and opportunism of the ruling elites in Bangladesh, especially since Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister in 2009.

To summarize, Hasina and whoever is backing her in Bangladesh and abroad are nearly as unpopular as she is. Additionally, India is unpopular in Bangladesh as well. As a result, India has few or no options when it comes to deciding Bangladesh’s domestic and foreign policy on its own. As

paradoxical as it may seem, most Bangladeshis approve of US sanctions, because they do not understand their true purpose (which is primarily to harm Chinese interests in Bangladesh). Bangladeshis also oppose Bangladesh joining the Quad, the US-led military alliance against China, let alone following India's approach. In other words, while US sanctions are an integral part of the country's China-bashing policy, if the Hasina Regime does not toe the line, the latter can punish the dictatorial regime by default, a regime that thrives on human rights violations. In summary, it is uncertain whether the Hasina Regime will survive the US sanctions or be forced to hold free and fair elections for a smooth transition to a genuinely elected government.

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7. Problematic Integration of Minorities: A Case Study of *Bihari* Muslims

Taj Hashmi¹ 

(1) Hawaii, HI, USA

Thousands of families of unfortunate Muslims, many of them refugees from Bihar ... were mercilessly wiped out. Women were raped or had their breasts torn out ... Children did not escape the horror: the lucky ones were killed with their parents The real toll ... may have been as high as 100,000.

—Anthony Mascarenhas, Anthony Mascarenhas, “Genocide,”
The Sunday Times, June 13, 1971

These people (“Biharis”) from the moment they are born till their last day, neither want to live nor wish to die—disgusted with life and afraid of death!

—Ibrahim Jalees, “A Grave Turned Inside-out” (translated by V. Adil and A. Bhalla), Alok Bhalla (ed.), *Stories About the Partition of India*, Vol. II, Indus, New Delhi 1994, p. 141

Keywords Biharis – Geneva Camp – Kader Siddiqi – Muhammadpur – Mirpur – Syedpur – Khalishpur – Pahartali – Anthony Mascarenhas – Qutbuddin Aziz – Enemy and Abandoned Property Act – Major Jalil – Kamal Siddiqi

***Biharis* as Victims of Nationalisms**

Successive governments of Bangladesh, along with the vast majority of Bangladeshis, have consistently denied the existence of any discrimination against the ethnic, religious or linguistic minority groups living in the

country. The case of the *Biharis* in Bangladesh is different from the other minority groups. In the first place, the average Bangladeshi does not accept them as members of a minority of citizen status, let alone agree with the view that the *Biharis* were (or are) ever discriminated against or victimized. Bangladeshi intellectuals, politicians, businessmen and others argue that

- (a) the *Biharis*, in general, collaborated with the Pakistani Occupation Army during the Liberation War in 1971 and were responsible for the killing of thousands of Bangladeshis;
- (b) they were/are nothing short of “war-criminals”; and
- (c) they were/are “stranded Pakistanis,” who should be sent back to Pakistan.

One is not likely to hear from them that just a handful of *Biharis* actively collaborated with the Pakistanis in 1971 (as did many Bengali Muslims), and that is no justification for treating about a quarter-million of them as pariahs, crowding them into unhygienic refugee camps in Dhaka and elsewhere. Few Bangladeshis talk about thousands of innocent *Bihari* men, women and children being killed during and after the war by Bengali “freedom fighters” and others, or about hundreds of thousands of them losing their properties in the wake of the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Many Bangladeshi Muslims would argue that (a) Bangladesh is a secular country, although Islam was declared as the “State Religion” in 1988; (b) communal rioting and discrimination on the basis of race, religion and language are matters of the past, prevalent only during the colonial and Pakistani periods; (c) Bengali Muslims are different from fellow Bengalis or Muslims elsewhere in South Asia in that they are mild, gentle and non-communal by nature; (d) people in Bangladesh live in peace and harmony with their neighbours; and (e) the creation of Bangladesh signalled the death knell of “communal” politics.

The imposition of a ban on Islam-oriented political parties by the government in 1972 may also be cited to highlight the secular nature of the polity. The subsequent lifting of the ban on parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami and Muslim League by the military government of General Ziaur Rahman may also be cited by some as a step taken in the opposite direction. The

adherents of such views impute communal behaviour and anti-Hindu incidents of loot and arson in Bangladesh in the early 1990s to the unhindered political activities of the Islam-oriented groups, implying, almost apologetically, that only the Islamists are communal (anti-Hindu) but all other Bangladeshi Muslims are free from the virus.¹ There are, however, objective accounts of the mass suffering of around a million *Biharis* during the last days of united Pakistan and during the Liberation War and in its aftermath. Anthony Mascarenhas, Qutbuddin Aziz, Sarmila Bose, Badruddin Umar and Yasmin Saikia, among a few other scholars, are very candid and objective in projecting the suffering of *Biharis* in Bangladesh. Aziz's, Bose's and Saikia's accounts are invaluable in this regard. They talked to the actual victims to give us almost eyewitness accounts of the massive pogrom and suffering of sections of this marginalized non-Bengalis of Bangladesh.

Although some Bangladeshi Muslim intellectuals would agree with the view that Bangladeshi Hindus (about 10 per cent of the total population) in general enjoy second-class status in almost every sphere of life, very few would accept that tribal groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been living in a much more difficult situation than the Hindus. Only a handful of Bangladeshi Muslims would agree with various international human rights groups and individuals who have documented incidents of mass murder, rape, looting and arson, committed by both Bangladeshi security forces and civilians against the Chakma and other ethnically non-Bengali minority groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts since 1972. A recent book by a Bangladeshi intellectual and a former minister under the Ershad regime not only is defensive about Bengalis but also portrays tribesmen as outlaws and killers. A minister of the Khalida Zia government has also been very critical of them, denying them any right of autonomy or separate identity.² It is equally interesting that those intellectuals, politicians and others who are critical of Islamic groups like the Jamaat-e-Islami and Muslim League are hardly critical of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who advised non-Bengali tribesmen to become "Bengalis" by denying their rights to retain their culture and ethnic identity.

This chapter aims at exploring the reasons why the *Biharis* who migrated to East Pakistan in the wake of the Partition of 1947, were not assimilated into the mainstream and why and how Bengali Muslims persecuted and exploited them. This is an attempt to understand why and

how nationalist movements, especially in the Third World, breed chauvinism, and to show how the bulk of the *Bihari* refugees were misguided by their West Pakistani patrons and their local non-Bengali agents, alienating them from the bulk of the Bengali population in East Pakistan. Later, during and after the civil war of 1971, this alienation was far more pronounced. In short, *Biharis* have been the victims of two divergent streams of nationalism—the Pakistani from 1947 to 1971, and the Bengali/Bangladeshi from 1971 to the present. The origin of the problem lies in the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. Prior to this Muslims had constituted a minority of four million out of nearly thirty million of the total population of Bihar. The large-scale exodus of Muslims from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal started in the wake of the massacre of thousands of them in Bihar and Calcutta in late 1946 and in 1947 and 1950 by Hindu and Sikh extremists. The Great Bihar Killings of October–November 1946, preceded by the Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946, alone led to the extermination of about 30,000 Muslims. Consequently, more than a million Bihari Muslims sought refuge in East Bengal after the Partition. Another 30,000 entered East Bengal from other parts of eastern India, especially eastern Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. They were followed by more migrants from eastern India after the communal riots of 1950 and 1964. The majority of these Muslim refugees were from Bihar and Calcutta, and all of them are collectively known as *Biharis* in Bangladesh.³

By 1971 their numbers had swollen to more than 1.5 million and often they were subsumed under the broad category of “non-Bengalis” which included various refugee groups from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat and other parts of north-western India. There were a few West Pakistani businessmen, petty shopkeepers, moneylenders and security guards (mostly Pathans) throughout East Pakistan. When the bulk of the *Bihari* refugees arrived in East Pakistan there was no land for them. Not being peasant or agricultural workers, they settled in urban and semi-urban centres. Many were self-employed small traders and mechanics, while others were government officials and clerks, teachers and professionals and skilled workers on the railways and in the mills and factories. By the early 1960s, most of them were provided with cheap housing in the refugee colonies of Dhaka (Mirpur and Muhammadpur), Chittagong, Syedpur, Rangpur and elsewhere in northern and western East Pakistan. The well-to-

do section of the *Biharis* lived in private residential areas in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet and other big towns.⁴ During the early days of the Pakistani government programme for refugee rehabilitation in East Pakistan, the local Bengali population did not resent the arrival of displaced *Biharis*. They were welcomed as fellow Pakistanis, who had suffered and sacrificed for the attainment of Pakistan. Up to the early 1950s, the bulk of the East Pakistani Muslim middle and lower-middle classes were in a state of euphoria, created by their birth of Pakistan. By 1951, a large number of Hindu professionals, clerks and petty officials, landlords and businessmen had emigrated to India. The East Bengali Muslims grabbed the vacant positions and “abandoned enemy properties” left behind in the urban and rural areas. They regarded the *Bihari* refugees as comrades-in-arms. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who later created Bangladesh, is said to have brought many *Bihari* Muslims over to East Pakistan in the wake of the Partition of 1947 by touring around Bihar, urging them to migrate to East Bengal.⁵

The Pakistani government for quite some time succeeded in portraying the *Biharis* as the *muhajirin* of Pakistan. Although the term literally means refugees, it has a much deeper religious connotation. Prophet Mohammad and his early followers from Mecca who emigrated to Medina were also known as the *muhajirin*, who received the support and protection of Medina’s Muslims or *ansars*. Similarly, Pakistani ruling elites, a few of them represented in East Bengal as well, might have adopted the term *muhajirin* with a view to making East Bengali Muslims duty-bound to help and accept them as their own people. This scheme worked for some time and not simply because of government machinations. To understand why the average Bengali Muslims did not resent the presence of the *Biharis*, one must understand how desperate he was to overthrow Hindu hegemony represented by the *zamindar-mahajan-bhadralok* (landlord-moneylender-middle class), especially during the four decades up to 1947.⁶ However, the honeymoon was short-lived. M.A. Jinnah’s speech in Dhaka in March 1948, stressing that “Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan” caused widespread consternation. To the surprise and dismay of most East Bengali Muslims, who had unflinching faith in Pakistan, Jinnah also declared that anyone opposed to Urdu as the “state language” was an enemy of Pakistan.⁷

What a handful of Bengali intellectuals and politicians realized not long after the creation of Pakistan—that East Bengal had virtually become a

colony of the western wing—was soon realized by many due to the speech of Jinnah of March 1948 and a chain of events and political developments that highlighted the preponderance of “non-Bengalis” in important sectors of administration. The Urdu-speaking East Bengali Prime Minister, Khawaja Nazimuddin, further enraged East Bengali intellectuals, students, politicians and others by unwittingly favouring Urdu as the state language in January 1952.⁸ Thereafter the eastern and the western wings of Pakistan gradually drifted apart. The West Pakistani civil and military rulers, the bureaucracy (mostly manned by “non-Bengalis”) with its colonial structure and mentality, “non-Bengali” interests in East and West Pakistan aided the process of disintegration. West Pakistanis behaved as if they, as members of a racially and intellectually superior race, had the divine mandate to rule East Pakistan. The upper echelons of the *Biharis* in East Pakistan, as junior partners of West Pakistani ruling and business elites, believed that their existence and continued prosperity in East Pakistan depended on the goodwill of the Pakistani ruling and business elites. Consequently, they also joined the anti-East Pakistani and pro-West Pakistani stream, mobilizing the half-educated or illiterate, poorer working-class sections of the *Biharis* against their Bengali neighbours, thus forsaking the economic and political interests of their adopted home. On several occasions, non-Bengali mill workers at Narayanganj, Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong took part in anti-Bengali communal riots whipped up by their Pakistani masters in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹

The Pakistani ruling and business elites successfully hegemonized the *Bihari* mass consciousness by distributing a few favours—jobs in mills and factories, railways and postal departments and cheap housing in several “refugee colonies” in Dhaka and elsewhere in the province, concentrating them in ghettos and isolating them from the Bengalis. Pakistani elites and their Urdu-speaking junior partners in East Pakistan exploited *Bihari* loyalty to Pakistan.¹⁰ regarded by many as their promised land. They often regarded them as “semi Hindus,” pro-Indian and disloyal to Pakistan.¹¹

Most *Biharis* believed that as Urdu speakers they were not only better Pakistanis than their Bengali neighbours but also racially superior. They regarded themselves as important partners of the Punjabi-/Urdu-speaking oligarchy of Pakistan and accepted the West Pakistani ruling and business elites as their sole patrons, guides and protectors. They had neither any representative in the Provincial or Central Legislatures nor any leader to

promote understanding between themselves and their perceived “friends” and “foes,” West Pakistanis and Bengalis, respectively. Consequently, they failed to understand that the Pakistani rulers were using them by alienating them from the indigenous population as European colonists had used Asian migrants against indigenous people in Africa.¹² Some scholars compare them with enterprising Jewish minorities, who “succeeded through hard work induced by their feeling of insecurity.”¹³ However, from their extra-territoriality and almost total indifference to the development and welfare of East Pakistan, it seems they had more similarities with Asian migrants in colonial Africa than with *hardworking* and intelligent Jews of Europe and America. Consequently, not long after the *Biharis* had settled in different urban areas of East Bengal, their anti-Bengali attitude and sudden prosperity (due to both hard work and government patronage) soon turned them into the most undesirable elements or “parasites of East Bengal” in the eyes of many Bengali intellectuals, traders, workers and professionals. By the late 1960s when most East Pakistanis started demanding more autonomy for their province, some *Biharis* openly sided with the quasi-military regime of President Ayub Khan. In contrast most *Biharis* in Karachi openly defied Ayub Khan, demanding more rights and opportunities for Karachi: unlike the *Biharis* in East Pakistan, Indian refugees in Karachi had leaders from within their own community who did not want to compromise with the central government at the expense of the interests of their adopted home, Karachi.

In East Pakistan, the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other Bengali nationalist politicians in 1966 led to widespread violence and many Bengali students, intellectuals and politicians raised the cry for an independent state. By early 1969, due to the concerted efforts of all the leading opposition parties of both East and West Pakistan, President Ayub Khan relinquished power. The mass upsurge of 1969 also led to the release of many political prisoners, including the Awami League (People’s League) leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his “co-conspirators.” Soon, the militant, pro-independence “leftist” sections of the pro-Awami League student and youth organization began to raise slogans demanding total independence for East Bengal. *Jai Bangla* (Victory to Bengal) was one such slogan. Other slogans were far more provocative. By the late 1970 and early 1971, the Dhaka University campus was reverberant with *Ekta-duita maura dharo Sakal-bikal nashta karo* [Catch one or two *maura* or “non-Bengalis”

every morning and evening and eat them up]. Graffiti proclaiming Bengalis as the “most superior race in the world” (*Bangali bishwer srestho jati*) started appearing on walls in university campuses and elsewhere by early 1970.

***Bihari* Massacre Before and After the Pakistani Crackdown**

It is often presumed that the Bengalis started the massive lynching, rape and looting of “non-Bengalis” across East Pakistan only after the Pakistani military crackdown on 25 March 1971. As mentioned above, the organized vitriolic campaign against the “non-Bengalis”—singling them out as the arch enemies of Bengalis in East Bengal, à la the Nazi campaign against the Jews in Germany—began long before the National Assembly Elections in December 1970 in Dhaka and elsewhere. By the time of the December 1970 National Assembly elections of Pakistan, anti-non-Bengali feeling was whipped up to such an extent throughout East Pakistan that attacking “non-Bengali” shops and properties by Bengali mobs were quite common in Dhaka and Chittagong. The day (1 March 1971) President Yahya Khan announced his decision to prorogue the impending parliamentary session, Bengali mobs in big cities, especially Dhaka and Chittagong, targeted “non-Bengali” homes and establishments. Major General (retd.) Khadim Hussain Raja, who was the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 14th Division in East Pakistan in 1969–1971 writes that following the violent Bengali mob attacks on *Biharis* and well-to-do West Pakistanis took shelter inside the Dhaka Cantonment. They narrowly escaped from different residential areas in Dhaka, and were being taken care of by Pakistani troops days before the Pakistan Army’s crackdown on 25 March 1971.¹⁴ These attacks continued unabated, especially in the peripheral districts, until Pakistani control was re-established between late March and late April 1971. Thousands of *Bihari* men, women and children were killed. In many places, especially in the northern and south-western districts, thousands of *Biharis* were burnt alive or simply hacked into pieces by Bengali marauders.¹⁵ After the Liberation of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971, and in some cases after the Liberation of certain districts even earlier, more *Biharis* fell victim, to the terror let loose by genuine and pseudo-Bengali freedom fighters. Many *Bihari* and

Bengali collaborators of the Pakistani armed forces during the Liberation War of 1971 were gunned down during December 1971 to early 1972. Unlike the Bengali collaborators *Biharis* whether they collaborated or not, faced the wrath of Bengali freedom fighters and supporters/workers of the Awami League twice—once before the Pakistani crackdown on 25 March 1971 and later when they were charged with collaboration after the Liberation on 16 December 1971. However, most managed to survive either by handing over their entire properties—houses, shops, cars, cash and jewellery—to the mobs or through the direct intervention of the Indian Army and Border Security Force in the wake of the Liberation.

According to a report of the London-based Minority Rights Group, over 300 *Biharis* were killed by “extremist mobs” at Chittagong in early March 1971, and at Jessore, Khulna, Rangpur, Saidpur and Mymensingh. Some estimate that several thousand *Biharis* were killed prior to the Pakistani Army’s ruthless intervention on 25 March 1971, and that further reprisals against them followed when Yahya Khan arrested Sheikh Mujib and outlawed the Awami League.¹⁶ However, the “non-Bengali” version of the story does not tell us how *Bihari* marauders persecuted Bengalis under the protection of Pakistani authorities during April–December 1971.

The following account by Anthony Mascarenhas, the author of *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, highlights the plight of the *Biharis* as well. In his report, first written in May 1971, which was re-published in the *Sunday Times* on 13 June 1971, he writes:

Thousands of families of unfortunate Muslims, many of them refugees from Bihar ... were mercilessly wiped out. Women were raped or had their breasts torn out with specially fashioned knives. Children did not escape the horror: the lucky ones were killed with their parents; but many thousands of others must go through what life remains for them with eyes gouged out and limbs roughly amputated. More than 20,000 bodies of the non-Bengalis have been found in the main towns such as Chittagong, Khulna and Jessore. The real toll, I was told everywhere in East Bengal, may have been as high as 100,000; for thousands of non-Bengalis have vanished without a trace.¹⁷

Sarmila Bose has painstakingly collected evidence—mainly oral evidence from Bengali and non-Bengali interviewees in Bangladesh and Pakistan—of massive acts of the pogrom of *Biharis* in pre-and Post-Liberation Bangladesh. In Khulna district alone, she estimates several thousand *Biharis* got killed at the hands of Bengalis before and after 25 March 1971. Around 1000 of them got killed at the Crescent and People's jute mills alone, at the hands of a 400-strong armed gang under one Rustam Ali Sikdar, who was a peon at one of the jute mills. She believes, at Santahar alone—a major railway station in Bogra district—Bengalis wiped out around 15,000 *Biharis* before the arrival of Pakistani troops in March 1971. Citing Chakma King Tridib Roy (who collaborated with the Pakistani Occupation Army) Bengali freedom fighters and troops slaughtered thousands of *Biharis* in Chittagong, Rangamati and Karnaphuli industrial belt.¹⁸ In the light of scores of eyewitness accounts of the civil war in East Bengal in 1971 and the subsequent Liberation War (from 25 March to 16 December), it is no longer possible to argue that the assault on innocent civilians was a one-sided affair—Pakistanis and “*Biharis*” victimizing Bengalis—and that the Bengalis retaliated only after the *Biharis* had taken part in persecuting them in the wake of the Pakistani crackdown on 25 March.

Malcolm Browne of the *New York Times* reported from Chittagong in May 1971 that, before the arrival of Pakistani troops, “when Chittagong was still governed by the secessionist Awami League and its allies, Bengali workers, apparently resentful of the relative prosperity of *Bihari* immigrants from India are said to have killed many of them in large numbers.”¹⁹ The same reporter in another report from Khulna in early May narrated how thousands of “non-Bengalis” were butchered by Bengalis, tied to frames specially set up “to hold prisoners for decapitation.”²⁰ *The Times* of London cites a British technician who said that “hundreds of non-Bengali Muslims have died in the north-western town of Dinajpur alone.”²¹ From a memorandum submitted to the British Parliamentary delegation in Dhaka by Diwan Wirasat Hussain, a “non-Bengali” leader of the East Pakistan Refugee Association on 20 June 1971, it appears that out of more than 50,000 Muslim refugees of Dinajpur “barely 150 survived the March–April 1971 [prior to the arrival of Pakistani troops] massacre of non-Bengalis.”²² Other eyewitness accounts corroborate this.²³ Scores of other Western media reports substantiate the assertion that thousands of *Biharis* were

killed in different districts of East Bengal prior to the arrival of Pakistani troops.²⁴ It is difficult to agree with Mascarenhas that the military action of West Pakistanis preceded and did not follow massacres of non-Bengalis.²⁵ Not only do the testimonies of hundreds of victims contradict his assertion, but a report of the Minority Rights Group also affirms that thousands of *Biharis* were killed at Chittagong, Jessore, Khulna, Rangpur, Saidpur and Mymensingh in early March 1971, before the military action.²⁶ As mentioned above, Yasmin Saikia has done the most intensive research (she stayed about a year in Bangladesh, visited several *Bihari* refugee camps in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country) to give an account of what *Bihari* men, especially women, went through in 1971 and afterwards. Saikia's account is most credible because she is not Bengali and went all the way to Bangladesh from the US, solely to do her research on the memory of female victims (Bengali and non-Bengali) of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. As she interviewed scores of Bengali female victims of rape and abduction by Pakistani troops, so did she talk to *Bihari* women, who had been victims of rape by Bengali men in 1971 and early 1972. She also interviewed Kader Siddiqi, who publicly killed four unarmed *Bihari* men at Dhaka Stadium on 18 December 1971. As Firdousi Priyabhasani, a Bengali female victim of Pakistani atrocities reveals a lot in Saikia's book, so does Kader Siddiqi. While Priyabhasani feels the whole thing was a "nightmare" for her, Siddiqi feels extreme guilt for his action. "Only retrospectively he realizes that his judgment and violence against the *Biharis* for supporting Pakistan was much harsher than they deserved," Saikia affirms.²⁷

Significantly enough, the fifteen volume *History of the Freedom Movement of Bangladesh* (in Bengali) and scores of other studies are either silent about the massacre of *Bihari* civilians by members of the rebel Bengali troops and civilians or else defensive about Bengalis reacting to "non-Bengali" being armed by the Pakistani Army. Consider the following accounts of the Bengali-*Bihari* encounters during the Liberation War of Bangladesh given by three Bangladeshi freedom fighters. Rafiqul Islam (retired Major, who actively took part in the Liberation War), in *A Tale of Millions* gives a sketchy account of what happened on 3 March 1971 between Bengalis and "non-Bengalis" in Chittagong. He has carefully avoided the truth about Bengali civilians and Army and EPR troops' massive massacre of *Biharis* in Chittagong. His account goes like this:

In the early hours of the day, a procession was heading towards the city centre of Chittagong raising nationalistic slogans. When the procession reached the Wireless Colony—a non-Bengali populated area of the city—some unknown persons opened fire with rifles and physically assaulted the demonstrators. The Bengali hutments in the adjacent areas were set on fire and many people were burnt alive. News of this incident spread immediately and enraged the city people. *There was a serious breach of law and order. EPR [East Pakistan Rifles, para-military border security force] was called out to assist the civil administration. It was around 9 0'clock in the morning when I reached the Wireless Colony. By that time, serious rioting was reported from other non-Bengali areas of the city—Ispahani Colony, Ambagan Colony, Kulshi Colony, and Sadar Nagar. [Emphasis added]*²⁸

We also learn how Pakistani troops of the 20th Baluch Regiment were responsible for the deaths of several Bengali demonstrators. Of late, one Bengali journalist in a self-congratulatory style has praised his countrymen and the Government of Bangladesh for looking after thousands of “stranded Pakistanis” living in refugee camps in Bangladesh.²⁹ What is not revealed in such accounts is how thousands of “non-Bengalis” were killed in Chittagong alone between 3 March and 2 April 1971 from the beginning of the mass insurgency up to the reoccupation of the city by Pakistani troops. It is, however, difficult to ascertain the death toll in Chittagong. While the Government of Pakistan’s White Paper on the East Pakistan Crisis (published in August 1971) estimated the “non-Bengali” death toll to be 15,000, some eyewitness accounts mentioned the figure to be more than 50,000.³⁰

According to eyewitness reports, late in the night of 3 March, “a violent mob, led by gun-trotting Awami League storm troopers invaded the non-Bengali settlements in the city and looted and burnt thousands of houses and hutments.” Wireless Colony and Ferozeshah Colony, along with other *Bihari* settlements at Raufabad, Halishahar, Dotala, Kalurghat, Hamzabad and Pahartali in Chittagong city were attacked by Bengali civilians and rebel soldiers. The same sources also reveal that while the East Bengal Regimental Centre in Chittagong (the headquarters of Bengali troops) was the operational headquarters of the “rebels” (freedom fighters), “the

principal human abattoir was housed in the main town office of the Awami League.”³¹ Another eyewitness account by a Western reporter corroborates the foregoing assertion:

The events of March and April until recently remained a mystery to the outside world. Today they speak for themselves. The headquarters of outlawed Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Chittagong is still caked with blood, a grim memorial to a slaughter of Urdu-speaking Biharis by Bengalis. In Thakurgaon, a town in northern East Pakistan which has a large non-Bengali population, the killing may have been even worse. There I saw hundreds of women crying in the streets –widows of some of the 7000 Biharis reported to have been massacred.³²

According to Lawrence Ziring, Mujib’s call to strike on 1 March 1971, “was also taken as a call to arms and a bloody campaign of murder, arson and looting seized the province, especially the capital The East Pakistani Bihari community was the target ... and many of their numbers were butchered in wild orgies that the authorities [Sheikh Mujib and his party] seemed unable or unwilling to prevent.”³³ Ziring also writes about the large-scale looting and burning down of “non-Bengali” properties during 1 March–25 March, and the initial flight to India of tens of thousands. Many “non-Bengalis” were also flown to West Pakistan in the wake of the military crackdown on 25 March.³⁴ Another account by Mascarenhas (who had been sympathetic to the Bengalis) of the persecution of *Biharis* in East Pakistan reveals how the masses and their leaders, including Bengali military officers were prejudiced against the *Biharis*.

Communal Frenzy or Patriotism!

The killings of *Biharis* were not solely motivated by the patriotism or communal frenzy of Bengali nationalists. Petty bourgeois social envy and the lumpen proletariat’s proclivity to violence and anarchy were directly involved in the killings. The participation of peasants in some peripheral towns seems akin to Russian peasant involvement in the pogroms in the late nineteenth century.

As stated, the persecution of *Biharis* did not cease with the Liberation of Bangladesh in December 1971. Although only a handful of *Biharis* had joined the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF) and other auxiliary forces (*Razakars* and *AI-Shams*) raised by the Pakistani authorities, hundreds of *Bihari* men were captured by Bengali freedom fighters and taken blindfold to “execution” by locally organized “firing squads” on flimsy charges of collaboration with the Pakistanis and killing of Bengalis during the Liberation War. Yet many Bangladeshis, since the Liberation, have been blaming *Biharis* for the killing of several Bengali intellectuals in December 1971.³⁵ International observers have also pointed out that the nationalist local press repeatedly fuelled the Bengalis’ hatred of the *Biharis*, leading to the mass looting and expropriation.³⁶ After visiting some refugee camps in Bangladesh, Basant Chatterjee observed in 1973:

Perhaps no other class of people in the world today is as ruined, economically and socially, as smitten and smashed up as the community of the former Indian refugees in Bangladesh who are known here by the general term Bihari Today in Bangladesh, to be a Bihari is the worst crime Thousands have been discharged from service on the ground of “long absence without leave”, But their salaries and funds have not yet been paid Many persons rejoined duty on the strength of “clearance chits” given by Awami League MPs. But they did not return; even their bodies remained untraced.³⁷

Chatterjee asserted that “no Bangla leader, of the ruling party or the opposition,” ever took the trouble to visit the camps where the *Biharis* lived “not even like vermin because vermin move ... looking at them in their mat-cells, one can scarcely believe that these lumps of bone and skin can be living human beings. They all appear to be dead.” He rejected the Bangladesh government’s assertion that 260,000 *Biharis* opted for Pakistani citizenship as fictitious.³⁸ While thousands of *Biharis* fell victim to the wrath of Bengali nationalists from early March to late April 1971, after Liberation, many were actually killed or ousted from their properties by Bengalis having connections with the ruling Awami League Party. Ahmed Ilias narrates multiple stories about the killing and expropriation of *Biharis* in Bangladesh, which started even before the Pakistani military crackdown

on 25 March 1971 and continued after the Liberation in 1972. Mohammad Alauddin, an avowedly pro-Bangladesh *Bihari*, who had worked for the Liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, was hacked to death on 16 December 1971 (the day Bangladesh was liberated) in front of Mujib's house in Dhaka. The victim was celebrating the Liberation of Bangladesh along with thousands of Bengalis.³⁹

With a view to acquiring *Bihari* properties in big towns, especially in Dhaka and Chittagong, these properties were initially decorated with Awami League banners or signboards portraying them as Awami League or pro-Awami League student, worker or youth organization offices. Many *Biharis* were forced by Bengalis to sign documents indicating transfer of ownership of cars, houses and shops to their names.⁴⁰ An international observer points out how "Tiger" Kader Siddiqui, the leader of a guerrilla group from Tangail district, killed four unarmed *Biharis* two days after the Liberation, on 18 December 1971, before a crowd in Dhaka Stadium, "an act which was seen widely on television and in the world's press, but for which he has never been tried."⁴¹ The victims were alleged to have collaborated with Pakistan Army. Siddiqui himself bayoneted them to death. This extra-judicial killing is well-documented in Western media, including *Time* magazine. This writer was around in close proximity to the brutal killing.⁴² Interestingly, Mujib not only condoned the killing of the unarmed *Biharis* by Kader Siddiqui, but is also said to have told Kader Siddiqui: "Had you killed 400, not four *Biharis*, I would have been still proud of you."⁴³ The renowned late Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci brought the matter of the killings of four *Biharis* by Kader Siddiqui to Mujib's attention. As mentioned above, Mujib, in total disbelief, became furious at Fallaci, and she had to literally run away from his office, and she fled Bangladesh on the next available flight.

It is noteworthy that "Order No. 1 of 3 January 1972" of the Government of Bangladesh (issued before the release and arrival of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Bangladesh on 10 January) stipulated that the government could take over the control and management of those industrial and commercial concerns whose owners, directors and managers had left Bangladesh or "were not available" to control and manage the concerns or "could not be allowed to run them in the public interest." It empowered the new administration "to operate the bank account of the owners, the directors and managers."⁴⁴ The expropriated former owners of industries

and commercial concerns were either Bengali collaborators of the Pakistani occupation regime in 1971 or “non-Bengalis,” presumed Pakistani collaborators by default! Soon, this order became the Bangladesh Abandoned Property Order, on 28 February 1972. It empowered the government to dispose of “abandoned properties.” The vagueness of the definition of “abandoned property” was taken advantage of by government-appointed “administrators.” Thus, many “non-Bengali” industrialists and businessmen (big and small), who were still in Bangladesh, were literally on the street.

Prominent Bengali attorney Moudud Ahmed defended the rights of some Bangladeshi citizens whose properties had been brought under the broad category of “abandoned.”⁴⁵ “Almost every property of every non-local or Bihari who migrated originally from India years ago and settled and had not opted for Pakistan, was taken over as abandoned property or was under the threat of being taken over. The politicians took the advantage of the miserable state of these people,” Moudud Ahmed points out. He also elaborates as to how local leaders of the ruling party or government “officers enjoying their patronage” took full advantage of the government order. Ghazi Gholam Mustafa, a stalwart of the ruling Awami League Party and chief of the Bangladesh Red Cross, supervised and expropriated “non-Bengali” industrial, commercial and residential properties in Dhaka and its suburbs at Tejgaon and Tongi.⁴⁶ Following the withdrawal of the Indian Army in late January 1972, the Bangladesh government sent soldiers to the *Bihari* enclave at Mirpur in Dhaka who, in the name of recovering arms, killed and arrested many *Biharis* though the Bangladeshi press, with the sole exception of the left-wing Sunday paper, *Holiday*, remained silent.⁴⁷

Ahmed Ilias, himself a *Bihari* professional who migrated to East Pakistan in the early 1950s writes:

After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, this microscopic Urdu-speaking community was stripped off all their social, economic and cultural rights for the alleged collaboration of a small section of this community with the occupation forces during the nine months of Liberation War. This allegation was never judicially proved. The discrimination between collaborators on the basis of language was seen during the post-Bangladesh time when the Bangla-speaking collaborators were given the opportunity for their political, social

and economic rehabilitation in the mainstream of the society and on the other hand, the Urdu-speaking were collectively blamed as collaborators and driven out from their houses, jobs, businesses and trades and educational and cultural institutions and pushed to live in the so-called non-local camps for an indefinite period.⁴⁸

After Bangladesh came into being, around half-a-million unemployed and expropriated *Biharis*—stigmatized as Pakistani collaborators, war criminals or simply “stranded Pakistanis”—lived in camps in Dhaka and northern Bangladesh as refugees in their own adopted homeland. Their children who were born after the emergence of Bangladesh and were eighteen and above by 2001 were not allowed to cast votes as “stranded Pakistanis.” A group of ten residents of the Geneva Camp in Dhaka (where they lived in UN-run refugee camps) filed a writ petition in the High Court against the refusal of Election Commission. On 5 May 2003, the High Court acknowledged the ten writ petitioners as Bangladesh citizens and allowed them to vote. Interestingly, the Bangladesh government interpreted the High Court ruling as only applicable to the ten petitioners, not to the entire *Bihari* community. However, *Biharis* at Mirpur (a suburb in Dhaka city) submitted another writ petition to the High Court, seeking citizenship of Bangladesh. On 8 May 2008, the High Court granted full citizenship to all *Biharis* in the country and opined: “By keeping the question of citizenship unresolved on the wrong assumption over the decades, this nation has not gained anything rather was deprived of the contribution they could have made in the nation-building. The sooner the Urdu-speaking people are brought to the mainstream of the nation is the better.”⁴⁹

Bengali Accounts of the *Bihari* Massacre

The story of *Bihari* massacre in East Pakistan and Bangladesh remains incomplete without highlighting some very objective (mostly eyewitness) accounts by Bengali intellectuals of the mass killing, rape and expropriation of *Biharis* in 1971 and 1972. Renowned Bangladeshi writer, historian and political activist Badruddin Umar’s account is quite gruesome. He narrates what he saw in a river while fleeing in a country boat to save himself from Pakistani Army troops in 1971. He gives an account of seeing many *Bihari* women’s and children’s bodies floating in the river:

I noticed one Bengali man pulling something in the water. Then I realized it was a woman's body floating on water, and the man was trying to get something out of the body. My boatman told me the man was trying to get some jewellery off the body. Then suddenly I noticed something very disturbing. I saw lots of female bodies together, floating on water. They were all shalwar-kameez clad. They were all Non-Bengalis as Bengali women in those hardly wore shalwar-kameez. I also noticed some dead children as well The bodies were coming from Tekerhat. Later I heard that somewhere nearby, Bengalis killed many "Bihari" men and women who were fleeing in two motor launches, and threw their bodies into the river. Those women were fleeing from Narail in Jessore. Bengalis first killed "Bihari" men, and then slaughtered their women and children. Later, Kamal Siddiqui (the Bengali Subdivisional Officer of Narail) told me that he had rescued the "Bihari" women and wanted to send them by motor launches to India to save their lives I never saw so many "freshly slaughtered" dead bodies before!⁵⁰

The Bangladesh Army-led operation at Mirpur led to a massive massacre of *Biharis*. The Army demolished thirty *Bihari* houses and asked the "non-Bengalis" to assemble at the local Eidgah Maidan. And, afterwards many of them were gunned down by the Bangladesh Army troops. Meanwhile, hours after the Pakistani surrender at the Dhaka Race Course on 16 December 1971, hundreds of "non-Bengalis" had become hapless victims of mass lynching, rape and looting by angry Bengali mobs Dhaka city. The situation was not that different at Khulna, Chittagong and elsewhere in the newly liberated country.⁵¹ The toll in Khulna alone reached 1000 on 10 March 1972. Many more were killed by Bengali extremists after the Liberation, mainly with a view to grabbing their properties.⁵² Bengali political scientist Talukder Maniruzzaman affirms that "This fact [mass killing of *Biharis* by Bengalis] was also not reported by the press." He narrates the Narail massacre of "non-Bengalis" by a "detachment" of Bengali freedom fighters, which included some civil servants and police officers: "Unfortunately, the detachment also killed almost all of the able-bodied Biharis (non-Bengalis) of the Bihari Colony on the Narail-Jessore Road, thus exacerbating communal tensions in that area. Nevertheless, these successes of the Jessore Mukti Bahini enthused

Bengalis throughout the province.”⁵³ The British daily *Telegraph* corroborates Maniruzzaman’s story thirty-five years after the massacre of non-Bengalis in Jessore by “Bengali Nationalists” in April 1971. “The massacre may have been genocidal, but it wasn’t committed by the Pakistan Army. The dead men were Non-Bengali residents of Jessore, butchered in broad daylight by Bengali Nationalists.” The report cites Sarmila Bose and British writer Rushbrook Williams’s book *The East Pakistan Tragedy*, published in 1971 (which was based on the author’s extensive field trip in East Pakistan in 1971), who also have mentioned the Jessore massacre of non-Bengalis. The Report further adds: “Once one took a second look, some of the Jessore bodies are dressed in *salwar kameez*—an indication that they were either West Pakistanis or ‘Biharis’, the non-Bengali East Pakistanis who had migrated from northern India.” *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* carried the photos on April 3 1971 massacre at Jessore, the *Telegraph* reports. *The Times* of London carried the photos of the massacre on April 2, 1971 with a caption, “Mass Slaughter of Punjabis in East Bengal,” and reported that “Local followers of Sheikh Mujib were in control in Jessore at that time.”⁵⁴ Witnesses from 1971 have reported rapes, killings and torture committed against *Bihari* men, women and children, painstakingly documented by Western reporters, Qutbuddin Aziz, Ahmed Ilias and a few others in their writings. It is best not to reproduce the lurid details. During 1971, I lost more than a dozen Bihari school friends to Bengali mobs. I was personally aware of around 500 Bihari women, men and children being burned alive, and women and young girls being raped and massacred at Sirajganj, a small town in northern Bangladesh, on 27 April 1971, the day before Pakistani troops entered.

A somewhat balanced assessment of what happened during and immediately after the Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971 was made by the late Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, a Bengali politician (Foreign Minister of Pakistan in 1956) and the founder of the daily *Pakistan Observer*:

During the whole period, a large number of Bengali private citizens were killed. On the other side the Urdu speaking citizens in East Pakistan, who were considered to be Pakistanis, also suffered grievously. No real figure of the total loss of lives has ever been collected by any authority. Some said it could exceed a hundred thousand. My guess was it might be something like 10 to 15

thousand. Almost all the businesses and industries set up by the non-Bengalis were looted, damaged and forcibly occupied by rowdy elements. Many leading non-Bengali businessmen succeeded in leaving East Pakistan in early 1971 fearing the breakdown of law and order and thereby saved their lives. Otherwise, no mercy would have been shown to women and children of the Urdu-speaking citizens. Large numbers of Bengalis suffered at the hands of non-Bengali elements in different parts of East Pakistan. I lost more than one relative in the hands of some Urdu-speaking rowdies, though they were not connected with politics.⁵⁵

To turn to the other Bengali accounts of what happened in Chittagong and other towns in 1971, we may refer to Major General Safiullah's book on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Like Major Rafiqul Islam, Safiullah was also a sector commander (a Major in 1971) during the Liberation War (chief of the Bangladesh Army up to August 1975). Safiullah's account is not very different from Rafiqul Islam's. However, he portrayed the *Biharis* of Chittagong as allies of the Pakistani troops. Rafiqul Islam has used the evasive expression of "serious rioting" to misconstrue organized killing of *Biharis*. Again, Safiullah portrayed the "non-Bengalis" of Chittagong as "looters" and "killers" of Bengali civilians.⁵⁶

Barrister Moudud Ahmed (a "freedom fighter" and a well-known politician), on the other hand, offers a relatively objective account of the Bengali-*Bihari* problem during 1971. He argues that the Pakistani Army quietly distributed arms in the "non-Bengali" ghettos in Mirpur and Muhammadpur in Dhaka, Pahartali (Chittagong) and Syedpur (Rangpur). He narrates that, prior to the military crackdown on 25 March, "some non-Bengalis killed some Bengalis" with impunity and the Army shot the Bengalis down when they tried to retaliate. At the same time, he points out that Mujib urged the Bengalis to continue their struggle in a "peaceful and disciplined manner," and on the other, assured the "non-Bengalis" living in East Bengal fair treatment as "sons of the soil." Mujib also urged Bengalis to protect the life and properties of "every citizen whether Bengali or non-Bengali, Hindu or Muslim." Mujib is said to have sent some top Awami League leaders to Chittagong in early March to maintain the peace in the area.⁵⁷ What is missing in this account is that, long before the deadlock over the transfer of power to the majority party (Awami League) in early

March 1971, a different section of Bengali students, workers and others had already started a bitter anti-non-Bengali movement throughout East Pakistan. While Moudud Ahmed tells us that illegally armed *Biharis* in Dhaka city started killing Bengalis before the military crackdown on 25 March 1971, which is a one-sided story, his illegal occupation of a *Bihari* property creates some questions. Until June 2017, he and his family lived in an illegally occupied Bihari property—a lavish house—along Road-79 of Gulshan-2 until evicted by the Dhaka City authorities.⁵⁸ Interestingly, while Moudud Ahmed has scathingly criticised ruling Awami League leaders and activists for illegally occupying non-Bengali residential properties, businesses and industries—which led to “chaos, corruption, loot and plunder”—soon after the Liberation,⁵⁹ he himself had no qualms with grabbing one such property for himself and his family!

Kamal Siddiqui—a retired Bengali bureaucrat, a former CSP officer and Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia up to 2006, who is also a freedom fighter—gives a personal account of how some Bengali freedom fighters, including the late Major Abdul Jalil, plundered *Bihari* property and abducted and sexually abused *Bihari* women soon after the Liberation in December 1971. In a personal note to this writer, Kamal Siddiqui, who was a District Commissioner (DC) of Khulna after the Liberation, gives a vivid account of Major Jalil’s role in this regard:

My patience with Jalil broke down when a Bihari mother begged me to rescue from Jalil’s custody her three adolescent daughters, kidnapped under his orders. So, I rang him up immediately, and he had the cheek to tell me: “What is so earthshaking about this? They raped our women. Now it is our turn to take revenge”. I replied that this could not be the logic of a disciplined soldier with any moral compunction, and if he did not return these three girls to their mother immediately, he would be my enemy for good. He asked me to go to hell.⁶⁰

Kamal Siddiqui also reveals that two freedom fighters (one bureaucrat and one police officer)—the latter is widely known as the killer of Leftist activist Seraj Sikdar in 1975—shortly after the Liberation, had a private “harem” or pleasure house in Dhaka where they had several Bihari girls who used to comfort Bengali men. Last but not least, Siddiqui gives solid

evidence about the real reasons why Jalil was unceremoniously discharged from the Bangladesh Army, which were plundering *Bihari* property, abduction and rape of their women. Siddiqui writes: “It was, therefore, a cock and bull story that he [Jalil] was arrested by the Indian army for opposing them on various issues.” Siddiqui cites Major-General (retd.) the late Mainul Hussain Choudhury’s own writing in corroboration: “Towards the end of December, Major Jalil was arrested and brought from Khulna and placed at my disposal.”⁶¹

Conclusion

The roots of the conflicts which divided peoples of the Subcontinent into different phases—first, Hindus were separated from Muslims and then the line of separation was drawn between different ethnic and linguistic groups—are by-products of elite conflicts, and competition between unequal middle classes. Consequently, the concept of nationalism, as developed in the Subcontinent during the last hundred-odd years has been germinating conflict. In short, the Hindu-Muslim, Bengali-*Bihari* and Bengali-“Tribal” conflicts in Bangladesh are part of much larger conflicts and identity crises in the Subcontinent. So far as East Bengal is concerned, the Partition of 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 have neither benefited the minorities nor resolved the problematic issues of nationalism in Bangladesh. Hindu Bengalis and *Bihari* Muslims, along with the “tribesmen,” have consequently suffered most due to the changes in the political geography of the region since 1947. The persecutions have been a by-product of peasant xenophobia, petty-bourgeois greed and intolerance, class conflict and racism/communalism nurtured and exploited by ultra-nationalist Bengali leaders.

However, unlike the anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia, Ukraine and Poland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the killings in Bangladesh were neither inevitable, precipitous outcome of class conflict nor a by-product of any spontaneous “primitive rebellion” of the peasantry. The *Biharis* had hardly any conflicting class interests with the peasants and the bulk of them did not represent the mythically prosperous “non-Bengalis” in the region. Their segregation from the Bengalis in towns and small trading centres, retaining their own distinct identity, which parallels the prevalence of Jewish ghettos in Russia and Poland in the nineteenth

century, alienated them from the indigenous people. By 1971 they further alienated themselves from the bulk of the Bengali population because they nursed the illusion of being part of the Punjabi civil and military ruling elites.

One needs to understand why “these non-Bengalis, who had no other place on earth to live in except Bangladesh put their sole reliance on the military masters of the West although in any system of government it was the Bengalis—and not the Punjabis—who were bound to enjoy the substance of power.”⁶² As discussed earlier, the main reason for their lack of commitment to Bangladesh, especially during the Liberation War of 1971, was because they were not sure of securing equal citizenship rights in the event of the emergence of Bangladesh. Already stigmatized as vicious, conspiring agents of exploitation long before the civil war started in March 1971 by different sections of the Bengali bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes, the *Biharis* were victims of wild rumours about their participation in the mass-killing of Bengalis and as co-conspirators of the Pakistani military junta. Consequently, under the leadership of those Bengalis who had an eye on *Bihari* property, Bengali peasants, soldiers and other lumpen elements let loose a reign of terror. Their acts of unbridled terror have striking similarities with those committed by Russian, Ukrainian and Polish peasants who took part in the anti-Jewish pogroms under local leadership believing their victims to be potential enemy agents—“pro-Polish” or “pro-German” from the Russian point of view and “pro-Russian” from the Ukrainian and Polish points of view.⁶³

In sum, with the annihilation, mass expropriation and disclaimer of almost all the *Biharis* of Bangladesh as citizens they are today no longer components of the minorities in the country. They are, in a way, victims of nationalism—Pakistani as well as Bengali/Bangladeshi, and subjected to persecution and discrimination. However, in 2008, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted citizenship rights to all the *Biharis*—around a quarter-million of them—who mostly live in congested and unhealthy concentration-camps-like one-room houses, allocated for each family, where parents, children and grandchildren live since 1972. However, in hindsight, it appears that even the dead *Bihari* victims of Bengali mobs and freedom fighters have to compete against the dead victims of the Pakistani military and their local collaborators with regard to number! Bengalis love to believe that Pakistanis killed three million of their own people in 1971,

but are not prepared to accept thousands of *Biharis* also got killed—let alone 100,000—at the hands of Bengalis. Interestingly, while Bengalis love Anthony Mascarenhas for giving quite a high number of Bengalis as victims of Pakistani “Genocide” in 1971, they are very displeased with him because in the same *Sunday Times* article of June 13, 1971 he also gives an estimated number of 100,000 *Biharis* as victims of Bengali atrocities, killed by May 1971. We know thousands of them got killed afterwards, even after the Liberation. Last but not least, even after five decades of the emergence of Bangladesh, the bulk of the *Biharis* in Bangladesh still identify themselves as “Stranded Pakistanis,” speak Urdu and send their children to Urdu-medium schools in *Bihari Camps* (116 of them exist across the country, 22 at Syedpur, in northern Bangladesh, and 1 each at Muhammadpur and Mirpur in Dhaka). They also feel discriminated against by Bengalis.⁶⁴

Footnotes

¹ See for details, Arun Sen and Mafidul Haq (eds), *Dhangsha Stupe Alo: Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir Bibad* (in Bengali), Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka 1993; Shahriar Kabir, *Bangladeshe Samprodaikotar Chalchitra* (Bengali), Pallab Publishers, Dhaka, 1993; Mahmudur Rahman Manna, *Samprodaikota O Jamaat* (Bengali), Ananya, Dhaka, 1993; and Taslima Nasreen, *Lajja* (Bengali), Pearl Publications, Dhaka, 1993; Some Facts, *Communal Persecution and Repression in Bangladesh*, Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad, Dhaka 1993, passim.

² Mizanur Rahman Shelley (ed.), *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: Untold Story*, Centre for Development Research, Dhaka 1992, pp. 168–77; Oli Ahmad’s (Former Minister of Communications, Government of Bangladesh) interview with the BBC Television, 31 May 1995.

³ Minority Rights Group, “The Biharis in Bangladesh”, Report no. 11, 4th ed, London, 1982, p. 8.

⁴ See Map-Source, *ibid*.

⁵ Maulana Bhashani (1880–1976), one of the political gurus of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is said to have told this to Basant Chatterjee. See Basant Chatterjee, *Inside Bangladesh Today: An Eyewitness Account*, New Delhi, 1973, p. 85.

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8. The Crisis of Identity: Bengali, Islamic or Islamist Extremism?

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We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

—Kurt Vonnegut Jr., in his “Introduction” to the 1966 edition of his *Mother Night*

O people of the Book, do not be fanatical in your faith and say nothing but the truth about God.

—The Qur'an, 4:171

Keywords Jamaat-e-Islami – JMB – HUJI – BNP – Awami League – Ziaur Rahman – Ershad – Khaleda – Hasina – State religion – ISIS – Mufti Hannan – Sheikh Abdur Rahman – Bangladeshi nationalism – Holi Artisan Café

Islamism: An Identity, Ideology or Terror!

Apparently, the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 in the name of Bengali nationalism signalled the departure of Islamism/political Islam or Islam-based state ideology of the Pakistani period. To some scholars, the creation of Bangladesh delegitimized the “two-nation theory,” which in 1947 justified the communal partition of the Indian Subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Soon after its emergence, Bangladesh adopted the four-pronged state ideology of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. However, not long after the emergence of the nation-state, Islam re-emerged

as an important factor in the country, both socially and politically. Although the not-so-democratic regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1972–1975) retained secularism, along with democracy, socialism and nationalism, as the state principles, his assassination and the overthrow of his government by a military coup d'état in August 1975 brought Islam-oriented state ideology by shunning secularism and socialism. Not long after his ascendancy as the new ruler in November 1975, General Ziaur Rahman replaced the outwardly secular “Bengali nationalism” with “Bangladeshi nationalism.” One may argue that “Bangladeshi” is inclusive of the different non-Bengali minorities; nevertheless, the term highlights the Muslim identity of the country, differentiating its Muslim-majority Bengalis from their Hindu-majority counterparts in West Bengal in India.

It is noteworthy that most Bangladeshi Muslims suffer from a tremendous identity crisis. They are not sure which comes first—their loyalty towards Islam or towards Bangladesh.

It seems, after the failure of the “socialist-secular-Bengali nationalist” Mujib government in 1975, his successors realized the importance of political Islam to legitimize their rule; hence, the rapid Islamization of the polity. This type of state-sponsored Islam, reflecting the hegemonic culture of the civil and military oligarchies seeking political legitimacy, may be classified as “political Islam.” This is not typical to Bangladesh and has happened elsewhere in the Muslim world. Countries such as Egypt and Algeria, for example, which also went through socialist and secular phases of their history under Nasser, Ben Bella and Boumediene before turning to “political/militant Islam” in the recent past. Very similar to Egypt and Algeria, while the successors of Nasser and Boumediene have adopted political Islam to legitimize their rule, the successors of Mujib also adopted political Islam after the failure of the “welfare state” or the promised socialist utopia. The case of Pakistan is very different. The ruling classes there have established their hegemony by legitimizing themselves in the name of Islam—the *raison d'être* for Pakistan, which has a special significance for the bulk of the Pakistani Muslims.

Meanwhile, like their counterparts elsewhere, Bangladeshi Muslims at the different levels have adopted various other types of Islam—escapist, fatalist, puritan and militant, for example—as alternatives to their failed welfare state. An understanding of political Islam and other variables in the arena of Bangladesh politics requires an intimate knowledge of what the

people need and what the leaders have been promising them since the inception of the separatist movement for Bangladesh in the 1960s. The gap between what the people have attained since independence and what the liberal-democrat, socialist-secular and nationalist leaders (both “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi”) have been promising to deliver is the key to our understanding of the problem. The case of Bangladesh is very special as unlike Muslim-majority countries in the Islamic heartland, Bengali Muslims throughout history had been syncretistic until their exposure to proto-Wahhabi movements and mass participation in anti-landlord (anti-Hindu) and anti-colonial movements and “jihads” in the nineteenth century. Although “peasants’ Islam,” or Robert Redfield’s “little traditions,” represents the mainstream of Islam in Bangladesh; urban Muslim elite and their rural counterparts, representing the “great traditions” of Islam, have been the main custodians and guardians of Islam in the country. The preponderance of “folk Islam” in both urban and rural Bangladesh, wherein the adherents follow their faith more as a cult rather than a philosophy stimulated by piety and ethical code of conduct. Faltering and failing governance in the country since its emergence in 1971 has reinforced political Islam and Islamism both by default and by design. Thus, while spiritual and dogmatic Islam are counter-ideologies of peaceful coexistence with the devil, or one of total withdrawal or escapism from the devil’s world.

The primacy of Muslim identity by over-shadowing their “Bengali syncretism”¹ was evident in the leading role Bengali Muslims played in a Muslim separatist movement for Pakistan.² In this backdrop, their active role in the creation of Bangladesh in the name of Bengali nationalism apparently signalled the departure of Islamism or Islam-oriented state-ideology of the Pakistani period (1947–1971). While it is a legitimate question if the creation of Bangladesh delegitimizes the “two-nation theory,” the corner-stone of Pakistan; conversely, the growing Islamization of the polity—both politically and culturally—may be explained in terms of Bangladeshi Muslims’ re-assertion of their Muslim identity or “*Muslimness*,”³ a significant affirmation of their “*non-Indianness*” as well. In view of the metamorphic changes of identities of Bengali Muslims since the 1940s, it appears that sometimes they cling to their “imagined community” while at times they get motivated by certain negative factors, which Guha has explained as “Negation.”⁴ Bangladeshi Muslims for the

last two centuries are going through a metamorphic process, struggling between their Bengali and Muslim identities.⁵ One must not ignore the fact how the vast majority of East Pakistani Muslims remained loyal to Pakistan till the late 1960s. During the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965, not only East Pakistani Muslims wholeheartedly supported Pakistan against India, but Bengali soldiers of Pakistani armed forces also fought gallantly defending their “motherland” against Indian “aggression”; scores of Bengali Muslim writers composed patriotic songs and play to inspire fellow Bengalis to fight and die for the sovereignty of Pakistan and the Liberation of Indian-occupied Kashmir. Bengali Muslims leading role in the creation of Pakistan and their whole-hearted support for Pakistan against India, especially during the 1965 war, are least palatable facts to the avid Bengali “patriots.”

An understanding of Islamism in the country requires an understanding of the gap between what the people have attained since independence and what their secular-nationalist leaders have been promising for long. Of late Bangladesh has come out of the shell of religious tolerance, peace and tranquillity; it has been witnessing terrorist attacks, including suicide bombing since the late 1990s. One may impute Islamist resurgence and terrorism in Bangladesh to various indigenous and foreign factors, such as mass poverty and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The post-Cold War obsolescence of communism has made Islam more attractive to Muslim “subalterns” across the board. Interestingly, civil, military, Islamic and quasi-secular elites and large sections of the masses are using Islamism as their ideology in the ongoing conflict of hegemony. Consequently, while the polity remains Islamized culturally and politically, half-baked democracy remains marginalized and sandwiched between various types of Islamism and military rule. During the military’s “time-off” from direct or indirect involvement in politics, “Illiberal democracy,”⁶ with dynastic paraphernalia, takes over the country; and very similar to Pakistan, good governance and development remains the “unfinished business” in Bangladesh to the advantage of obscurantist forces.⁷

The failure of the “welfare state” under “national-socialist-secular-democracy” introduced by Mujib paved the way for an “Islamic solution” to the problems of bad governance and mass poverty. Mujib’s introduction of the one-party dictatorship in early 1975, which to a large extent was a replica of the Soviet system, struck the last nail into the coffin of his tottering regime. Consequently, the military takeover, which resulted in

Mujib's and most of his immediate family members' death, went un lamented, even by his own party leaders. Meanwhile, exposure to Middle Eastern premodern Islamism to millions of Bangladeshi workers had established Islamism as an alternative order at the grassroots. Thus, both the military and civilian rulers exploited Islamism for the sake of legitimacy. Meanwhile, the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion-induced Afghan Jihad of the 1980s accentuated transnational Islamism throughout the Muslim World, including Bangladesh. Thousands of Bangladeshi Muslim youths who swelled the ranks of Afghan Mujahedeen in the 1980s have been the vanguards of various transnational Islamist terror networks in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Having the largest concentration of Muslims per square mile in the world, around 88 per cent of the estimated 170 million Bangladeshis being Muslim, live in an area of 144,000 sq. kilometres; 104th in landmass and 8th in terms of population in the world. The Hindus constitute around 10.5, Buddhist 0.6, Christian 0.3 and others 0.3 per cent of the population. The very high unemployment rate and the widening gap between the rich and poor are quite discomfoting. While on the latest Global Hunger Index of 2020, Bangladesh is ranked 75th out of 107 qualifying countries well ahead of neighbouring India.⁸

Although since 1976 “Absolute faith in Allah” not “Secularism” is one of the four state ideologies; and Islam, the “State Religion” since 1988, there is nothing discriminatory against any community—religious or ethnic—in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Anybody can hold any position irrespective of her / his faith, gender or ethnic background in the country, unlike Pakistan, where the head of the state has to be a Muslim as required by the Constitution. Nevertheless, Hindus and other religious, ethnolinguistic minorities—Buddhists, Christians, Hill Tribes and *Bihari* Muslims—are regularly discriminated against in every sphere of life. Consequently, there has been a constant flow of Hindu emigration from the country since 1947. Influential Bengali Muslims have benefitted most from the expropriation of Hindu and *Bihari* Muslims since 1947; the latter lived as stateless “stranded Pakistanis” from 1971 to 2008, as discussed in Chap. 7.⁹

Historical Overview

Although Islamization of the region started with the Muslim conquest of Bengal in 1204, the process in eastern Bengal did not accelerate until the mid-sixteenth century under the influence of charismatic Sufi saints.¹⁰ Bangladesh is possibly the only country in the world that became independent twice in a span of twenty-odd years; first in 1947 from the British and then from the Pakistani hegemony in 1971. As elaborated in Chap. 2, the British contempt for Muslims, mainly during the first hundred years of the Raj, had been the most important factor behind mass Muslim participation in various anti-British, violent and non-violent movements, including “jihad” from time to time. Muslim aristocrats and administrative elite in Bengal who had been dominant under Muslim rule up to the mid-1760s became the first victims of the British onslaught. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement of land revenue in 1793—Marx’s “caricature” of the British land system—was catastrophic to Bengal’s agriculture, industries, legal system and Hindu-Muslim relationship. The Settlement installed classes of nouveau riche parasitical people—more than 90 per cent Hindu, mostly traders, moneylenders and revenue officials—as landlords or *zamindars*. Muslim aristocracy, unemployed soldiers and judges, impoverished peasants and idle weavers suffered most under the new land system.¹¹ While the landlord’s revenue liability to the government was fixed *permanently*; his tenants were subject to the arbitrary enhancement of rent and numerous illegal exactions. Hindu *zamindars*’ resorting to various modes of torture and public humiliation of their tenants are legendary, so are the accounts of Muslim peasant resistance.¹² By the 1870s, the pauperization of Bengali Muslims was complete and devastating under the Raj. As illustrated in Chap. 2, pauperized East Bengali Muslim peasants and artisans provided the bulk of the Mujahedeen under the millennial Jihadist mullahs of north India to wage anti-Sikh and anti-British jihad during the 1820s and 1860s in northwest India and southeast Afghanistan.¹³ Bengali Muslims remained avowedly anti-British up to the 1870s. Thanks to the influence of pacifist and “loyal” Muslim reformers like Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (1800–1873)¹⁴ and the British government’s taking a “benign and pro-Muslim” policy in the 1870s onwards, Bengali Muslims started legitimizing the Raj of Queen Victoria and her successors. It is noteworthy that by the turn of the twentieth century, Bengali Hindus were at the forefront of the anti-British Indian nationalist movement. Henceforth, due to the divisive British policy and Hindu discrimination and prejudice

against Muslims, in alliance with northwest Indian Muslims, Bengali Muslims turned pro-British *loyalists* and Muslim *separatists*. The upshot was the communal partition of the Subcontinent in 1947.

Muslim-majority eastern Bengal became the eastern wing of Pakistan, signalling the ascendancy of the new Muslim elite, dominated by bureaucrats, professionals, petty landlords/rich peasants (*jotedars*) and traders, while the civil society remained weak and irrelevant like any other postcolonial society in the Third World.¹⁵ Then again, the Bengali Muslim elite in eastern Pakistan did not uniformly benefit from the mass emigration and expropriation of the hitherto dominant Hindu elites; only people having connections with the powerful non-Bengali Muslim elites benefitted most, others remained as marginalized as before the Partition. Conversely, more prosperous and urban western Pakistan benefitted most from the Partition through mass immigration of well-to-do Muslim traders, professionals and entrepreneurs. The changing demography of the two wings of Pakistan in the post-Partition years, along with uneven development and non-Bengali exploitation of the eastern wing eventually paved the way for Bangladesh. The bulk of the Muslim Bengalis, mainly representing lower middle classes, small traders and peasants, remained disillusioned and sections of them started questioning and challenging the non-Bengali aristocrat-bureaucrat-trader classes at the helm of the statecraft.¹⁶ This schism between the two wings eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh due to West Pakistani obduracy, racism and above all military crackdown on East Pakistanis in 1971. Direct Indian involvement in harbouring, training and arming Bengali freedom fighters, and finally, military intervention led to Bangladesh.

Soon after its emergence, Bangladesh adopted the four-pronged state ideology of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. However, not long after the emergence of the nation-state, Islam re-emerged as an important factor in the country, both socially and politically. As mentioned in Chap. 4, Zia replaced “Secularism” with “Absolute faith in Allah” from the preamble of the Constitution, to distance from Mujib’s “national socialist” regime, Ershad in 1988, introduced Islam as the “State Religion,” which no successive regime could remove, as Islam had re-emerged as the state ideology in the collective psyche of Bangladeshi Muslims.¹⁷ So much so that, as discussed above, even the “secular-socialist” Awami League started using Islamic symbols and rhetoric and in 2006, it even signed a pre-

electoral deal with an obscurantist Islamist outfit called the Khilafat Majlis. The state-sponsored Islamism, reflecting the hegemonic culture of the civil and military oligarchies seeking political legitimacy is not unique; Pakistan is another example in this regard. Meanwhile, like their counterparts elsewhere, Bangladeshi Muslims have adopted various other types of Islam—escapist, fatalist, puritan, liberal and militant—as alternatives to the failed ideologies of the “welfare state,” *à la* Algeria and Egypt. Yet, despite the phenomenal growth in ritualistic Islam in Bangladesh, the average Muslim has remained almost totally insensitive to corruption, deception and immoral behaviour of traders, professionals, bureaucrats, politicians and members of the civil society. In view of the Transparency International’s singling out Bangladesh as the most corrupt country consecutively five times during 2000–2005, one wonders if Bengali Muslims’ apparent religiosity has any positive correlation with their moral degeneration at all as they accept corruption as a way of life, while Islam remains barely a shield against divine retribution in the hereafter. The average mullah being totally dependent on elites for sustenance, only preach the fear-cum-reward-oriented Islam, devoid of any ethics and philosophy, let alone criticism of elite manipulation and corruption. The fear-cum-reward-oriented Islam seems to be the main catalyst in the promotion of next-worldly fatalism among Bengali Muslims.

In sum, the emergence of Bangladesh has not destroyed the “two-nation theory”; rather Bangladeshi Muslims’ growing sense of insecurity vis-à-vis Indian domination, if not occupation, is at the core of their espousing an Islamic identity. Basant Chatterjee has succinctly appraised the situation:

Somebody should ask these hypocrites [Bangladeshi Muslims] if they could give one good reason for the separate existence of Bangladesh after the destruction of the two-nation theory. If the theory has been demolished, as they claim, then the only logical consequence should be the reunion of Bangladesh with India as seems to be the positive stand of the Bangladeshi Hindus had Pakistan not been created then, Bangladesh too would not have come into existence now.¹⁸

Who Are the Islamists?

This study requires an understanding of the two parties that have been championing the cause of Islam—one, on behalf of the government since 1975 and the other, the various Islamic groups, parties and individuals with both pro-and anti-government inclinations. These groups and individuals may be classified as (a) the fatalist/escapist; (b) the Sufi/*pir*; (c) the militant reformist (“fundamentalist”) and (d) the “Anglo-Mohammedan” (anglicized or Westernized Muslims aiming at synthesizing Islamic and Western values for temporal benefits). The fatalist/escapist groups represent the bulk of the poor, unemployed/underemployed people having a next-worldly out-look and philosophy. They often belong to the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ); a grassroots-based puritan movement that originated in northern India in the 1920s, having millions of adherents in Bangladesh. Unlike the militant reformists belonging to the Jamaat-i-Islami (despite their formal adherence to constitutional politics) and other groups, including the clandestine ones, the Tablighis represent a pacifist, puritan and missionary movement. Every winter they organize a mammoth rally or *ijtima* at Tungi, near Dhaka, attended by more than a million devout Muslims from Bangladesh and elsewhere. The Sufis and *pirs* represent mystic Islam. They belong to several mystic orders or *tariqas*, having *muridan* or disciples among all sections of the population, especially among peasants. They exert tremendous influence on their *muridan*. They may be politically motivated having renowned politicians, including General Ershad, as their *muridan*. They are generally opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami and Tabligh movements, but there are instances of Jamaatis and Tablighis paying respect to certain *pirs*. While the militant reformists, including the Jamaat-e-Islami, are in favour of an Islamic state as an alternative to the existing system of government in Bangladesh, the “Anglo Mohammedans” are the anglicized or Westernized Muslims aiming to synthesize Islamic and Western values for temporal benefits. They can be believers, agnostics and even atheists, but for the sake of expediency, political legitimacy, social acceptance and above all, power, are often vacillating. They popularize political Islam, which could be avowedly anti-Indian and tacitly anti-Hindu. They are very similar to the Pakistani ruling class, since the inception of the country, has been promoting communal, anti-India/anti-Hindu political Islam for the sake of legitimacy. It is noteworthy that the followers of the above groups might shift allegiance. A Tablighi might join the Jamaat-e-Islami (as Jamaat

leader Ghulam Azam did) and an Anglo-Mohammedan might turn Tablighi one day.¹⁹

However, despite their mutual differences and enmity, especially between the orthodox ulama/*pirs* and the Jamaat-e-Islami, these groups have certain commonalities. Excepting the Anglo-Mohammedans, the other three groups oppose women's Liberation; Western codes of conduct, law and ethics, and even dress and culture; and are in favour of establishing Shariah or Islamic law. The most important aspect, which is common to all four groups, is their stand vis-à-vis India and Pakistan. They are invariably anti-Indian and pro-Pakistan. It may be mentioned that the ulama belonging to the "Wahhabi" School of thought, who run thousands of madrasas or Islamic seminaries with an ultra-orthodox and conservative curriculum throughout Bangladesh, are inimical to the Jamaat-e-Islami and its founder, Maulana Maududi (1903–79).²⁰ The counterparts of these seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan, known as *qaumi* (national) madrasas, produced the *Taliban*. The "pro-Taliban" groups in Bangladesh, for ideological reasons, are opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami. However, as it happened in Pakistan, they might unite against common enemies at the height of polarization between Islam and some other forces, especially in the wake of 9/11, the Afghan War of 2001 and the Israeli invasion of the Palestinian territory in March and April 2002.

The emergence of the Jamaat as the third-largest party in terms of its share in total votes cast in 1991 elections alarmed its rivals. In March 1992, the proponents of the Spirit of the Liberation War, under the leadership of Colonel (retired) Nuruzzaman (with the blessings of retired Professor Ahmed Sharif of Dhaka University) organized a "public trial" of Jamaat leader, Ghulam Azam, an alleged war criminal, for his active collaboration with Pakistan during the Liberation War. No sooner had Ghulam Azam been elected as the chief of the Jamaat in Bangladesh that the organizers of the "trial" formed the Killer-Collaborator Elimination Committee (*Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee*). Promptly, the Awami League lent support to the Elimination Committee. Obviously, as some analysts observe, they did so to gain political leverage.²¹ The "trial" was embarrassing both for the Jamaat and for its allies, the BNP government. Curiously, the Awami League, which had earlier supported the physical attack on Jamaat leader, Motiur Rahman Nizami, by some Dhaka University students in May 1991, later asked the Jamaat leaders to "forget the past and look forward to the future."

And in early 1991, the party had no qualms about sending its presidential candidate to Ghulam Azam for his “blessings,” as the members of the parliament elect the President of the Republic. The Jamaat then had twenty members in the parliament with unflinching loyalty towards Ghulam Azam.²²

Islamists in Bangladesh also started facing a hostile West not long after the Gulf War of 1991. The West must not have relished the way a large number of Bangladeshi Muslims, including leading politicians from the so-called liberal democratic parties like BNP and Awami League had expressed solidarity with Saddam Hussein. Some candidates during the parliamentary elections of 1991 even identified themselves as “Saddam’s candidates,” displaying life-size portraits of the Iraqi dictator.²³ The Jamaat, however, opposed Saddam Hussein’s Kuwait invasion, which, according to a Jamaat leader, cost them dearly as most Bangladeshi Muslims were supporters of Saddam and bitter critics of the West.²⁴ However, the Jamaat’s poor performance in all the previous and successive elections belies this assertion. Nevertheless, the fact remains that by the 1990s the Jamaat had not only regained its lost image (despite its anti-Liberation role in 1971) but also started playing the role of “kingmaker,” as evident from the results of the parliamentary elections since 1991 vis-à-vis the formation of government by the two major political parties, BNP and the Awami League.

The late 1980s and early 1990s also witnessed the gradual transformation of the cold war between the Islamists (mainly the Jamaat) and the so-called secular/liberal forces into open confrontation. The latter, the “pro-India” and “pro-Western” lobbies, respectively, represent the Awami League (and its allies belonging to the erstwhile pro-Soviet political parties) and the various NGOs/ human rights groups. They have been opposing the Jamaat in the name of championing the cause of Liberation, women’s rights, human rights, minority rights and secularism. The Taslima Nasrin episode, the NGO-mullah conflict and the mutual mud- slinging between the mullah and Awami-NGO lobbies are parts of the play called the “Public Trial of Ghulam Azam” in 1991. While the mullah has been vilifying the Awami-NGO lobby as the “enemies of Islam,” “Indian agents” and “agents of neo-imperialism,” the latter has been portraying the former as “anti-Liberation/Pakistani agents,” “fundamentalist/Taliban” and “Communal” (anti-Hindu and anti-minority fascist). One may cite scores of

scurrilous writings against the so-called Islamic fundamentalist-cum-communal forces, especially the Jamaat.²⁵ The “secular/liberal” group owns most of the well-circulated Bengali and English newspapers in the country. The Reliance Group of India owns the well-circulated *Janakantha*.

Nothing could be triter than portraying the Jamaat as “communal” and “anti-Liberation” in the Post-Liberation period, let alone as pro-Taliban. Jimmy Carter felt that Islamic parties who believed in election, despite having “fundamentalist” belief and support for Shariah law, could not be classified as “extremist.”²⁶ And those among them who have accepted the reality of Bangladesh cannot be simply rejected as anti-Liberation, either. Nevertheless, the fact remains that some powerful Jamaat leaders do not believe in the democratic way of coming to power—some of them do not rule out the adoption of the “other means,” or armed insurrection, to capture power.²⁷ Jamaat workers’ militancy and their occasional armed encounters with “liberal democrats” (mainly the Awami Leaguers) alarmed many about an “eventual” Jamaat takeover of the country. Many Bangladeshi intellectuals felt that the BNP-Jamaat coalition government that came to power in October 2001 had been too soft on the Jamaat. Even the government’s 2002 banning of a movie, *Matir Moina*, for its negative portrayal of the madrasa system of education was read by many, not as a fear of the Awami League by the BNP, “but of Jamaat-e-Islami deserting the BNP.”²⁸

Meanwhile, urban mullahs with rural background and links have been campaigning against the NGOs and their urban patrons and associates, mainly professionals and intellectuals, often portraying them as *murtads* (apostates), enemies of Islam and agents of neo-imperialist West.²⁹ And as per in Islamic law, apostates are liable to capital punishment. Death warrants and bomb attacks on some of the enlisted *murtads* presumably by Islamic militants became quite common during 1991–2001. The ongoing conflict between the pro-NGO “civil society” and the anti-NGO Islamists in early 2001 alarmed the US State Department and various donor agencies, including the Asian Development Bank. Pointing out its adverse effects on the economy of Bangladesh, they condemned the “violation of human rights” in the name of Islam.³⁰

While celebrating the Bengali New Year—an “un-Islamic” festival to some Muslim clerics—on 14 April 2001, a bomb killed several people at Ramna Park in Dhaka. In June, a village church was bombed at Gopalganj

(Sheikh Hasina's home district) and soon the police arrested one Mufti Hannan, the alleged mastermind. The police also arrested four madrassa teachers for their alleged involvement in the Ramna Park bombing. However, the Hasina government lost credibility for producing contradictory stories and evidence with regard to the bombing.³¹ Yet from another newspaper report, we learn about the *Harkatul Jihad*, an "Islamic militant" group, said to have been engaged in terrorist activities in parts of Chittagong district in association with several Rohingya Muslim militant organizations from Arakan, Myanmar. The previous governments up to 1996 (prior to the formation of the Awami League government under Hasina) allegedly armed these groups who aim at capturing state power.³² One has to be too naïve to believe the story. As discussed earlier, during the fracas between the pro-and anti-fatwa groups in 2001, some mullahs threatened to stage a "Taliban-style revolution in Bangladesh." The rhetoric, wishful thinking and verbal attacks on secular law and institutions do not prove anything. Despite the sensational reporting by a section of the press, hinting at the "impending" collapse of law and order, one does not get any conclusive evidence about the so-called Taliban activities in Bangladesh. The following reports may be cited in this regard:

One Muhammad Yaqub, a "Taliban militant," who had been to Saudi Arabia as an expatriate worker and trained in Afghanistan, was arrested in Chittagong.³³ Members of the Shahadat-i-al-Hikma [hitherto unheard of], a pro-Taliban "martyrs' organization," pasted posters at different places in Rajshahi, including the University campus, exhorting Muslims to learn "the proper use of arms." Syed Kausar Hussein, the chief of the group, who had been to Saudi Arabia as an expatriate worker, was trained in Afghanistan. According to the police, the posters reached Rajshahi from Dhaka. Hussein is a former *madrassah* student and used to run a small business in Rajshahi.³⁴

Islamist Modus Operandi

However, while the average Bangladeshi Muslims' adherence to spiritual Islam merely reflects their escapist/fatalist behaviour; they mostly ignore the Islamist utopia for an alternative Islamic order. However, political Islam

devoid of militancy is both an alternative order and their “security blanket” against Indian domination. Here Islamist militancy is altogether a different ball game, reflective of marginalized Bengali Muslims’ aspirations to justice and equal opportunity; and their leaders’ quest for power under an alternative “Islamic Global Order.” This is a by-product of what scholars consider Islam’s extra-territorial and transnational appeal. There is nothing exclusive about Bangladeshi Muslims’ reverting to spiritual and political/militant Islam; this may be a postcolonial syndrome, a common phenomenon throughout the Muslim World. Postcolonial states, having over-developed bureaucracy and under-developed civil society, keep elite corruption and government unaccountability normative; good governance and transparency elusive. Hence the illegitimacy of the government machinery among disempowered masses, always available for millennial movements for alternative orders—religious or secular—for peace, progress and prosperity.

In sum, the history, physical and political geography, demographic pressure, lack of resources and trained manpower, endemic corruption and mismanagement, and above all, the systematic and mindless destruction of the education system which Bangladesh inherited from its colonial past by its postcolonial rulers are positively correlated with the prevalent disorder in the country. One may find the parallel of the Bangladeshi syndrome in Algeria where the widening gap between the richer French and poorer “vernacular” (Arabic speaking) elites due to the prevalent school system have been afflicting the polity by splitting it up into employable and under-employable graduates.³⁵ Similarly, Bangladesh society is divided into three categories of people, (a) employable (richer) English-educated; (b) under-employable (poorer) Bengali (vernacular)-educated and (c) unemployable (poorest) madrasa-educated graduates. Sections of the under-employable and unemployable graduates from the “vernacular” schools and the madrasas respectively, have been the vanguards of the “Islamist Nihilist” movement in Bangladesh. Islamic resurgence and militancy are just two sides of the multi-faceted problems dogging the polity; they represent both marginalized people’s quest for an alternative order (an escape from the organized chaos) and their total alienation from the prevalent socio-political and economic order. The militants in short, primarily represent an “Islamist Nihilism” *à la* Al Qaeda, which stands for the belief that all established authority is corrupt and must be destroyed in order to rebuild a just society.

Two groups of parties have been championing the cause of Islam—one, on behalf of the government since 1975, and the other, various Islamic parties and individuals with both pro-and anti-government inclinations. These groups and individuals may be classified as the (a) fatalist/escapist; (b) militant reformist; (c) “Anglo-Mohammedan” and (d) liberal/modernist. The fatalist/escapist groups represent the bulk of the poor, having a next worldly outlook. They could simultaneously belong to the Tablighi Jamaat; a grassroots-based puritan movement originated in northern India in the 1920s, having millions of adherents in Bangladesh. Unlike the militant Islamists, the Tablighi Jamaat represents a pacifist, puritan missionary movement. Every winter they organize a mammoth rally or *ijtima* at Tungi, near Dhaka, attended by more than a million devout Muslims from Bangladesh and elsewhere.³⁶ Despite the TJ’s avowed apolitical stand and the dearth of any credible evidence to link the organization with any terrorist network or activity since its inception to protect Indian Muslims’ Islamic identity, its open-arm policy of letting any Muslim join the organization is worrisome. One may find TJ’s Deobandi roots and its adherence to the ultra-orthodox “Wahhabi” doctrine of Pan-Islamism (Deobandi clerics in Pakistan inspired the Taliban) is troublesome. Several terrorists in the recent past have already used the organization as safe haven. One is not sure if some Tablighi organizers are sympathetic to transnational Islamist terrorists and provide sanctuary to them.³⁷

The Sufis and *pirs* represent mystic Islam. They belong to several mystic orders or *tariqas*, having *muridan* or disciples among all sections of the population, especially among peasants. They exert tremendous influence on their *muridan*. They may be politically motivated having renowned politicians, including General Ershad, as their *muridan*. They are generally opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami and Tabligh movements, but there are instances of Jamaatis and Tablighis paying respect to certain *pirs*. While the militant reformists, including the Jamaat-e-Islami, are in favour of an Islamic state as an alternative to the existing system of government in Bangladesh. They can be believers, agnostics and even atheists, but for the sake of power, are often vacillating. They popularize “political Islam,” which could be avowedly anti-Indian and tacitly anti-Hindu. They are very similar to the Pakistani ruling class who since the inception of the country has been promoting the communal, anti-India/anti-Hindu “political Islam” for the sake of legitimacy. The liberal/modernist groups represent the bulk

of the educated Bangladeshi Muslims. They do not favour the political use of Islam and often promote syncretistic Bengali culture and identity. It is noteworthy that the followers of the above groups might shift allegiance. A Tablighi might join the Jamaat-e-Islami and an “Anglo-Mohammedan” might turn Tablighi one day.³⁸

However, despite their mutual differences and enmity, rival Sufis and the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islamic United Front (IOJ) and others have certain commonalities. Excepting the “Anglo-Mohammedans” and liberal modernists, oppose women’s Liberation, Western codes of conduct, law and ethics, dress and culture; and are in favour of establishing Shariah or Islamic law. The most important aspect, which is common to all the four categories, is their stand *vis-à-vis* India and Pakistan. They, with few exceptions, are mostly anti-Indian and soft on Pakistan. The *ulama* or clerics belonging to the “Wahhabi” or Deobandi school of thought, running thousands of *madrastas* or Islamic seminaries with ultra-orthodox curricula, are inimical to the Jamaat-e-Islami and its founder, Maulana Maududi (1903–1979). The counterparts of these seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan produced the *Taliban*. The “pro-*Taliban*” groups in Bangladesh, for ideological reasons, are opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami. However, as it happened in Pakistan, they might unite against common enemies at the height of polarization between Islam and “non-Islam.” For having intellectual connections (and possibly political links) with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists in the Arab World and elsewhere, the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh has been a big concern for people concerned with the rising tide of Islamism in Bangladesh. Since the 1991 parliamentary Elections, it has been the “king-maker” party in Bangladesh.

Not long after the overthrow of the Mujib government in 1975, the Jamaat emerged as a legitimate organization in Bangladesh. Unlike its counterparts in India and Pakistan, the Jamaat in Bangladesh is led and followed mostly by middle peasants and lower-middle classes but has never been the most popular choice for Bangladeshi Muslims.³⁹ It is widely believed that the Jamaat having several NGOs and charitable organizations across Bangladesh has been gaining ground, emerging as an alternative to the secular organizations.⁴⁰ Of late, sections of the Jamaat workers have adopted an anti-US stand. By the early 1990s, several militant splinter groups emerged out of the “vanguard” Jamaat-e-Islami. Although the Jamaat had faced a three-pronged attack from the Ershad government,

“secular/socialist/liberal” groups, and as mentioned earlier, from a section of the orthodox *ulama*, mostly belonging to the conservative Deoband School, the party has been gaining ground. The 1980s through the early 1990s had been the golden era for the Jamaat. By then their student wing had captured student unions at Chittagong and Rajshahi universities by defeating the combined groups of their opponents. This was the period when the party enjoyed the blessings of Saudi Arabia and, most importantly, the US.⁴¹ The Jamaat cut a good figure in the parliamentary elections of 1991 and 2001, and as a coalition partner of the “soft-on-Islam” Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government under Khaleda Zia during 2001–2006, the Jamaat had two important ministers in the cabinet.

The emergence of the Jamaat as the third-largest party in terms of its share in the total votes cast in the 1991 elections alarmed its rivals. In March 1992, the proponents of the “Spirit of the Liberation War” organized a “public trial” of Jamaat leader Ghulam Azam as a “war criminal,” for his active collaboration with Pakistan during the Liberation War. No sooner had Ghulam Azam been elected as the chief of the Jamaat in Bangladesh that the organizers of the “trial” formed the Killer-Collaborator Elimination Committee (*Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee*). Promptly, the Awami League lent support to the Elimination Committee. It seems, they did so out of political expediency.⁴² The “trial” was embarrassing both for the Jamaat and for its allies, the BNP government. Intriguingly, in early 1991, the Awami League had no qualms about sending their presidential candidate to Jamaat Chief Ghulam Azam for his “blessings” to get elected with the support of the twenty Jamaat members of the parliament.⁴³

Various “Pro-Liberation Forces” have been raising the demand for the trial of the “war criminals” since Sheikh Hasina became the Prime Minister in early 2009. In spite of this, the Jamaat is “not likely to die of atrophy because of its failure to become the mainstream of Bangladesh politics.”⁴⁴ The way Jamaat leaders have been adopting “pro-Bangladesh” rhetoric, it seems after the demise of the “war criminals” within the party it is going to be in the “mainstream” of Bangladesh politics. It has already accepted the reality of Bangladesh and female leadership to lead the country. Having transformed itself from “*Jamaat-i-Islami of Bangladesh*” into “*Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami*” and by successfully exploiting the anti-India sentiment by distancing itself from Al Qaeda, Iranian ayatollahs and their offshoots, the party is set to take off as the most stable third force in Bangladesh

politics.⁴⁵ Jamaat's strength lies in its clandestine network, organization, adaptability and unpredictability. Maududi, the founder, designed the party to be the vanguard of an Islamic Revolution under a Muslim fuehrer or Ameer which would work for the establishment of a totalitarian Islamic theocracy. Jamaat's overt "support" for democracy has convinced many in the West, including former President Carter that the party believes in democracy. The other side of the coin is revealing; Abbas Ali Khan, the Jamaat's acting chief in Bangladesh told this author: "Do you think we [Jamaat] will come to power through elections? We will resort to 'other means' to come to power."⁴⁶

It seems, the Awami League's and its allies' opposition to the Islamism and "Islam-loving" parties, in the name of "preserving the spirit of the Liberation War," is half-hearted and opportunistic. Awami League leaders' disparaging portrayal of the BNP as a promoter of Islamist militancy during President Clinton's Bangladesh visit in March 2001; and as "Bin Laden's Friends" on the eve of the parliamentary elections in October 2001 (soon after Nine-Eleven) were cynical and reflective of the bitter polarization of the polity between the two arch rivals, BNP and Awami League.⁴⁷ As discussed in Chap. 6, the Awami League signed a "pre-poll deal" with ultra-orthodox leaders of Islamist Khilafat Majlis party in December 2006. As per the agreement, if elected to power Awami League would implement Shariah, "Blasphemy Law" and "qualified mullahs' right to issue *fatwa*" on legal matters superseding the judiciary in Bangladesh. There was hardly anything so surprising about the deal as by the parliamentary elections of early 1991 various political parties, including the Awami League and the Communist Party of Bangladesh had resorted to Islamic symbols and slogans to come closer to the people.

It is noteworthy that the elections of 1991, contrary to the expectations of the Awami League, installed Khaleda Zia as the Prime Minister with the support of "Islam-loving" parties, especially the Jamaat-i-Islami. While the "Islam-loving" parties, got 54.13 per cent votes; despite their Islamic rhetoric, slogans and banners, the Awami League-led Eight-Party alliance managed to poll only around 34.81 per cent of votes in the elections.⁴⁸ One may again deduct more than 10 per cent minority (mainly Hindu) votes from the total votes polled by the Awami League-led alliance, as traditionally the minorities have been voting for the Awami League. This means, in 1991, around 75 per cent of Bangladeshi Muslims did not vote for

the Awami League. Most interestingly, however, the so-called secular-socialist Awami League also used Islamic rhetoric in its banners, letterheads and slogans in election rallies. One such slogan was “*La ilaha illallah, naukar malik tui Allah*” (There is no god but Allah, the boat [Awami League’s symbol] belongs to Allah.” The voting pattern has not changed much since 1991.⁴⁹ Islam was so important to draw Muslim voters’ support that not only major political parties like the BNP, Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami expressed solidarity with Islam, but some Leftist candidates also used Islam and Hindu-phobia to get elected with Muslim support. Leftist politician Rashed Khan Menon is said to have warned the Hindu voters in his constituency in Barisal through boldly written posters, conveying the threat: “Beware! Beware! No Hindu should cast his/her vote on the 27th. If you want to go to the polling centres, prepare all arrangements for your funeral pyre in advance.”⁵⁰ “Islam-loving” and anti-Awami League parties continue to draw more support among the average Bangladeshi Muslim voter. The Awami victory in 1996 was mainly due to its getting tacit Jamaat-support after the latter had felt marginalized by the BNP government (1991–1996). While in 2001 the BNP-Jamaat and the minor Islamist IOJ alliance swept the elections; the Awami victory in 2008 under the “extra-constitutional” military-led caretaker government was already questioned by many.

Islamic and Islamist politics is not all about the politics to run the polity; the well-entrenched albeit decentralized popular Islam often represented by the “apolitical” mullah, plays an important role in stirring up the polity by drawing world attention by projecting the country as anti-modern, anti-women and obscurantist. These mullahs sometimes champion the cause of Bin Laden, the Taliban and anti-American Muslim leaders like Saddam Hussein. General Ershad’s encouraging political Islam and declaring Islam as the State Religion in 1988 emboldened mullahs, especially at the grassroots. While the so-called *fatwa-to-kill* against Taslima Nasrin for her alleged blasphemous writings and statements against Islam drew world attention in 1994, persecution of poor rural women under the aegis of popular Islam has not totally disappeared in the name of Islamic justice. The public trial of poor women by village elders and mullahs, which led to hundreds of deaths of the victims during 1995–2000, convinced many in the West and elsewhere about the “impending” ascendancy of the Islamic extremists to power in Bangladesh.⁵¹

Islamic Militancy: Real or Imaginary?

Since the pro-Western/pro-Pakistani military takeover in August 1975, Bangladesh has been distancing itself from India and nurturing better understanding with Pakistan, China and the West. Discarding “Socialism” and “Secularism” from the Constitution in the mid-1970s, by 1988 Bangladesh adopted Islam as the “State Religion” and has not only become more Islamic than before but also become a “regional hub” of transnational Islamist militancy.⁵² As Pakistani and Bangladeshi Indophobia is behind the Islamization of the politics so is their perceptions (and experiences) of India as the “bully” impact the transnational security dynamics in South Asia and beyond. Soon after the 1975 military takeover General Ziaur Rahman (later President of Bangladesh up to 1981) told the US Ambassador Davis Boster: “Bangladesh has become pro-Pakistan, pro-Islam and pro-Western.”⁵³ India’s disillusion with Bangladesh began not long after the creation of the state as Bangladeshis had been fast turning anti-Indian due to the unfulfilled promises of independence attained with Indian help and intervention.⁵⁴

Later, the Bangladesh government, in league with the ISI of Pakistan, harboured separatists from India’s northeast; India retaliated by sheltering and training disaffected Hill-Tribes of Bangladesh, who later engaged in transnational terrorism and crime. Bangladesh- and India-based Islamist gangs have been organizing transnational “jihad” to create a greater (Islamic) Bangladesh by carving out parts of Assam and West Bengal from India and the Rohingya Muslim-majority Arakan sub-region from Myanmar.⁵⁵ Within less than a decade after the end of the US-led Afghan War, by 1999 Islamist terror networks made their presence felt in and around Bangladesh. What started as the sporadic bombing that killed innocent people at public places in Bangladesh in 1999 under the aegis of the Harkat ul-Jihad ul-Islami of Bangladesh (HUJI-B) or the Movement for Islamic Jihad (a Pakistani prototype having links with Al Qaeda), by 2004 this emerged as a serious threat to the stability of the region. Another Islamist terrorist group, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB), was founded by Afghan veteran Sheikh Abdul Rahman, and follows the footsteps of the HUJI-B. It has tentacles in Bangladesh, adjoining Indian states, Myanmar and possibly Thailand and Indonesia. While the HUJI-B is an off-shoot of Al Qaeda, the JMB is “home-grown.” The JMB affirms the

continuation of the nineteenth-century “jihad” waged in northwestern India and Bengal by the Indian “Wahhabis”; and interestingly, they organized their “jihad” under the banner of *Jamaat-ul-Mujahedeen*.⁵⁶ HUJI-B seems to be a go-between Indo-Pakistan-based Islamist outfits and their Southeast Asian counterparts from Myanmar to the Philippines. Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand are said to have received more arms and training from the HUJI-B than from the Jemaah Islamiyah of Indonesia and is in league with the MILF and Abu Sayyaf groups in the Philippines.

The HUJI-B came into being in 1992, not as a clandestine but as an open organization with a view to converting Bangladesh into an Islamic state. Mufti Abdul Hannan, the founder, a Bangladeshi Afghan veteran of the 1980–1990s, arrested in 2006, confessed having bombed and killed scores of people in the country during 1999–2005. He also confessed to having links with Arab, Pakistani, Burmese and Bangladeshi Islamists; and having supported Islamist militants outside Bangladesh, including the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) of Myanmar.⁵⁷ All bomb attacks/grenade attacks *not* by Islamists. Reza Kibria, son of late Shah A.M.S. Kibria, who was killed by a grenade attack in 2005, reveals his father was killed by others, not Islamists. He blames Awami League government for pressuring his family members to accept the charge sheet brought about by the government against BNP and Islamists. Reza Kibria believes there were others behind the killing of his father. He reveals this in an interview with Bangladeshi American journalist Kanak Sarwar on 16 February 2021.⁵⁸ Thus, nothing can be substantiated on the basis of Mufti Hannan’s alleged confession, as to who made the grenade attacks on an Awami League Rally in Dhaka, killing more than twenty people on 21 August 2004, and made another grenade attack on the British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury in Sylhet in 2005.

HUJI-B’s sponsors are believed to be the ISI and Pakistani Islamist outfits like the LeT and the Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). It is believed to have trained Rohingya and Thai Islamist separatists, and is also implicated in the 22 January 2002 bombing of the American Center in Kolkata and the 12 October 2005 suicide bombing in Hyderabad, southern India. The outfit is said to have close ties with Kashmiri, Afghan, Islamist separatists in Assam, the proscribed Students’ Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and other Islamist groups in India.⁵⁹ Islamists from Somalia and Sudan, Chechnya and Britain, Bosnia and Indonesia have links with their

Bangladeshi counterparts. The arrests of some Indian Islamist clerics in Bangladesh in July 2009, who had been illegally hiding and working in several madrasas in the country, were quite revealing. It is noteworthy that both HUJI clerics and some “home-grown” Islamist groups in Bangladesh had connections with drug baron Dawood Ibrahim’s associates, Abdul Rouf Daud Merchant, Zahid Sheikh and Arif, arrested in Bangladesh in May 2009. The HUJI-B has international donors as well as spontaneous local support from poor taxicab drivers, rickshaw-pullers and garment workers. Another report reveals that “at least 50 Indian gangsters” working for Dawood Ibrahim’s narco-terrorist group having links with the HUJI-B and LeT frequently visit Bangladesh. Dawood’s “second-in-command,” Chhota Shakeel, who operates from Pakistan and Dubai, has been sending large sums of money to finance the narco-Islamist terror network in and beyond Bangladesh. Pakistani Sunni extremist Sipah-e-Sahaba and *Ahl-e-Hadis* (“Wahhabi”) JeM collaborate with HUJI-B and JMB.⁶⁰

We cannot ignore how the Myanmar government’s discriminatory policies against its Muslim minorities since the 1970s have added a new dimension to transnational crime and terrorism in the region. Since “among Myanmar’s oppressed religious and ethnic minorities, Muslims are the worst-off under the military junta,” more than two million Rohingya Muslims are living as refugees, around one million in Bangladesh alone and more than 300,000 in Pakistan.⁶¹ Exploiting the “protracted statelessness” of the Rohingya refugees by the 1990s, Al Qaeda, HUJI-B and other Islamist outfits formed several transnational militant Rohingya groups to destabilize the region. The Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), Rohingya National Alliance (RNA) and Arakan Rohingya National Organization (ARNO) have been the leading ones among these groups. Many Rohingyas fought along with the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Some RSO members joined the separatist Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam (MLTA) and forged ties with Bangladesh Islamic Association. Soon after the US invasion of Afghanistan in November 2001, several hundred Taliban/Al Qaeda fighters secretly sailed to Chittagong from Karachi and joined hands with HUJI-B and RSO fighters.⁶² The RSO and RNA, in league with Islamists and narco-terrorists, are beyond the control of any government anywhere.⁶³

With a view to drawing attention to its demands for “immediate introduction” of the Shariah code, on 17 August 2005, the JMB blasted a

few hundred bombs throughout the country. Soon after these synchronized bombings, which killed several innocent people, JMB suicide bombers randomly killed several judges, police officers and civilians in Bangladesh. Ever since the arrests and execution of Sheikh Abdur Rahman and his main associates in 2007, the group is functioning under several nom de plumes. Being in touch with the HUJI-B and scores of foreign Islamist outfits, the predominantly *Ahl-e-Hadis* JMB has been organizing Deobandi “Wahhabi” militants from India and Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar. Despite several arrests of local and foreign JMB bomb-makers and weapon specialists in Bangladesh in 2008 and 2009, the group is still active under the banner of Islam and Muslim and is committed to establishing a “greater Muslim Bangladesh” comprising of parts of Assam, Myanmar, West Bengal and Bangladesh, as the first step towards its goal, an “Eastern Caliphate” in the region.⁶⁴

HUJI-B’s and JMB’s close ties with drug traffickers from Pakistan, India, Nepal and Myanmar is gradually turning them into self-sustaining terrorist organizations. While roughly 5 per cent of world drug trafficking is “routed through Bangladesh” as per Interpol estimate in 1996, in view of the arrests of Dawood Ibrahim’s men in mid-2009 in Bangladesh, who also had links with local Islamists, the figure might be much higher than what it was in 1996. The HUJI-B and JMB again jointly harbour more than a thousand Afghan veterans and thousands of unemployed and under-employed youths, mostly madrasa students as their foot soldiers.⁶⁵ Seemingly, Bangladesh has also become a haven for South and Southeast Asian Islamist extremists. As an “exporter of foot soldiers for Islamic radicalism” in the region, Bangladesh’s military intelligence (DGFI), during the BNP-Jamaat rule allegedly in league with the ISI, is said to have promoted trans-border terrorism in India and Myanmar during 2001–2006. Analysts believe that elements in Bangladesh’s armed forces had links with Islamists in Pakistan, and that whenever Bangladeshi journalists exposed the military’s links with Islamabad, they faced assassination attempts; the “most notorious case” being that of CNN correspondent Tasneem Khalil. The military tortured him in solitary confinement and forced him to leave Bangladesh in 2007. They also believe that the military regime hurriedly executed the top leaders of the JMB soon after their arrest, after they had “contacted the media to expose their links with the [military] intelligence.”⁶⁶ As Western prejudice against the BNP-led coalition

government with the Jamaat-e-Islami is the main coalition partner reached its peak by 2006—India, Hasina and her associates might have had successfully poisoned the West to denigrate the BNP and Jamaat as the main sponsors of Islamist terror in Bangladesh—it was too keen to replace the BNP-Jamaat government, even by an unelected civil or military government. This prejudice led to the military takeover of the country—which was avowedly pro-Awami League and surreptitiously pro-Indian—on 11 January 2007. The Western prejudice is well reflected in Western diplomats’ overtures to the Awami League and West-sponsored NGOs and civil society in Bangladesh during 2001–2006 to precipitate the desired outcome had been quite noticeable. Even the BNP-led the government’s taking firm action against Islamist terrorists, including the arrests and execution of some masterminds of the JMB and HUJI (B) in the country, could not neutralize the Western prejudice against Khaleda Zia and her government. This is well reflected in op-eds and editorials in Western media, including the influential *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.⁶⁷

Interestingly, while sections of the Western, Indian and Bangladeshi media, politicians and authors, and analysts had been busy vilifying government machinery and the BNP-Jamaat coalition governments in particular as the main promoters of Islamist militancy, a cover story by Bertil Lintner in the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)* gave credence to the allegation: “A revolution is taking place in Bangladesh that threatens trouble for the region and beyond if left unchallenged.” Lintner suggested that the Bangladesh government “seem to have paid scant attention to the deeper long-term danger” of Islamist resurgence in the country. His sensational style remained problematic and counterproductive. His citing a rustic mullah’s anti-American sermon as “evidence” of the cleric’s having links with Islamist militants did not help us understand the problem of Islamism in Bangladesh.⁶⁸ While the Awami League blamed the BNP-Jamaat coalition government for the “prevalent terrorist image” of the country and the BNP retaliated by blaming the Awami League for “planting” the *FEER* story.⁶⁹ Thanks to the partisan politics, soon the real issue, the hibernating Islamist threat to Bangladesh and adjoining regions disappeared into the thin air. A leading anti-Awami journalist, the late Enayetullah Khan, pointed out the *FEER* reporter’s alleged “Indian connections.”⁷⁰ It is noteworthy that the BNP-led government sued the *FEER* for damages to the tune of \$1 billion for “tarnishing the country’s

image.”⁷¹ Liberal democrats and media also condemned the *FEER* reports for their anti-Bangladesh stand. The *Daily Star* of Bangladesh in an editorial mentioned “regular and credible elections,” the freedom of expression, the existence of private TV channels, women’s impressive turnout in elections, the rise in literacy rate, women’s representation in the armed forces and their gradual empowerment process in Bangladesh to portray a liberal democratic image of Bangladesh. The editor considered the *FEER* article “prejudiced, one-sided and highly irresponsible.”⁷²

However, as indicated in the *FEER* report, one does not totally reject the presence of Islamist militants, and fanatics, in the country. In the changing post-Cold War environment of Globalization and market economy—which have adversely affected the poor and under-employed/unemployed people in Bangladesh (and elsewhere), Islamism has been emerging as an alternative order. Very similar to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Algeria and Egypt, among other Muslim-majority countries, Bangladesh has also been divided between the Western and “vernacular elite,” to paraphrase Oliver Roy. The latter representing the underdogs, forced to adopt alternative ideologies for the sake of survival.⁷³ During the Cold War, socialism, nationalism and separatist ideologies had been quite handy as alternatives to “Neo-Colonialism,” said to be the root of all evils. Curiously, the West, especially the US, during the Cold War promoted Islamism in various countries including Egypt, Pakistan and Afghanistan to counterpoise communism. Leaders belonging to the upper classes often espoused radical ideas in the name of establishing the Islamic welfare state. Some Muslim leaders, such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Nur Muhammad Taraki, Ben Bella, Nasser and Sheikh Mujib for example promoted “national socialism” as their version of the welfare state. In the post-Cold War era, Islamism has replaced the earlier doctrines with certain modifications—though retaining the same mass appeal—to empower the underdogs representing the peasantry (and/or tribes) and the “vernacular elite” from the lower-middle classes.

The countrywide condemnation of the *FEER* article (with the exception of the Awami League corroborating the story) was soon followed by its rebuttal by foreign reporters, diplomats and others familiar with Bangladesh. According to Philip Bowring, former editor of the *FEER*, Western “Islam-bashers” have been responsible for this type of “media demonization of Islamic nations.” He blames the avidly pro-US Dow Jones, who owns the periodical, for the sensational story, in line with the Western

media in the wake of 9/11. “For sure, some nasty extremists do exist in this as in all other countries, but the nation’s secular polity and the precedence of Bengali over Islamic identity is rooted in its independent history,” Bowring reiterates. To him, there is no point in going after the “make-believe enemies” in countries like Bangladesh, as the real terrorists live elsewhere, including some of the major Western cities. Bowring is critical of alienating hundreds of millions of Muslims, whom he thinks “are far more moderate than Christian fundamentalist zealots such as Attorney General John Ashcroft in the Bush government.”⁷⁴ Among several Western observers, Mary Anne Peters, US Ambassador to Bangladesh, was very critical of the *FEER* and the *Wall Street Journal* for publishing such biased articles on Bangladesh, “a liberal Muslim” nation. She felt that investigation was essential to find out the truth behind the story.⁷⁵

Despite such claims by Sheikh Hasina and other Awami League leaders that there were Taliban elements in the BNP, in October 2001, Khaleda Zia formed a BNP-led coalition government with the Jamaat. To Hasina, two cabinet ministers belonging to the Jamaat and one of her contenders in the election represent the Taliban. She told this to a BBC reporter in the US. Another Awami League leader, former Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, told the same thing to the visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Dhaka.⁷⁶ And the BNP cannot be singled out as an ally of the Jamaat. The Jamaat and Awami League were together against the BNP government of 1991–1996.

While in Iran and Afghanistan the well-entrenched mullah, in the absence of strong middle classes and modern institutions, succeeded in installing themselves to power (in both the cases with mass support), things are not that smooth for the Bangladeshi mullah. Apart from the similarities between Iran and Bangladesh, especially with regard to the influx of conservative peasants into the urban areas, there are striking dissimilarities between the two. Unlike Iran under the Shah, Bangladesh has been far more tolerant, democratic and “Islamic.” Here the governments from time to time adopt and sponsor “Islamic” slogans and characters for the sake of legitimacy. The replacement of Persian “Khuda Hafiz” (God bless you) by Arabic (more acceptable to the puritans) “Allah Hafiz,” in government functions and media, for example, by the BNP-led coalition government in 2001, are examples in this regard. It seems the major “liberal democratic” parties of Bangladesh have been competing against each other to prove their

Islamic credentials. In view of the rising Islamism in Bangladesh, what is mind-boggling is the way the polity metamorphosed itself from “democratic-secular-national-socialist” into an “Islamic” one in less than four years after its emergence. The mass acceptance of Islamist and secular Pakistani collaborators as leaders in independent Bangladesh is “enigmatic.” Islamist militants’ organized attacks, including suicide attacks, have added new dimensions to the state of Islamism in the country. However, these developments are hardly “least expected” or enigmatic.

As the *raison d’être* for Pakistan was hardly “Islamic,” so was the superficiality of “secular Bengali nationalism”; both the entities came into being as the would-be-beneficiaries wanted to get rid of uneven competitions from more advanced Hindus and non-Bengali Muslims, respectively. Post-Liberation Islamism is underdog Bengali Muslims’ “weapon of the weak” against dominant and pro-Western elites; and an effort to forestall (Hindu) Indian domination. It reflects Bangladeshi Muslims’ wavering identity and their leaders’ political opportunism, very similar to what Pakistan has been going through since its inception. In short, the main predicaments of Bangladesh seem to be the crises of (a) existence; (b) leadership; (c) governance; (d) identity. All these crises collectively have led to the problem of Islamism. Some people in Bangladesh nourish extra-territorial loyalties towards secular “united Bengal” or Islamist “Greater Bangladesh”; some Hill Tribes dream of an independent *Jhum Land* by carving out Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh posing potential dismemberment of the country. Then again, the West Bengal-based *Swadhin Banga Bhumi* (Free Bengali Land) movement by Hindu Bengali immigrants from Bangladesh have been promoting centrifugal forces within Bangladesh to create an independent “Hindu Homeland” out of several Bangladeshi districts.⁷⁷ Consequently, the growing support for preserving Bangladesh’s Muslim identity among Bangladeshi Muslims is a counterpoise to all secessionist movements.

The thoughtless education system has further polarized the country between rich and privileged English-educated (“pro-Western”) and poor and marginalized Bengali- and madrasa-educated groups. In short, Bangladesh provides a glaring example of what can go wrong with a nation, which was once a prosperous region in the Asia-Pacific up to the early 1950s. Consequently, already troubled by wavering identities, Bangladesh seems destined to be ruled by civil-military oligarchs under “dynastic democracy”

or sugar-coated martial law for decades. Meanwhile, despite its wait in the shadows ominously, militant Islamists have no chance whatsoever to take over the country, not in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, one cannot be that categorical about the likelihood of an Islamic alliance gaining enough support to come to power through elections if the so-called liberal-democratic parties continue to behave erratically, promoting corruption, inefficiency and mutual bickering for long. The cumulative effect of bad governance, hyperinflation, corruption and lack of resources mainly contributed to the rise of Islamism in Bangladesh. The post-Cold War obsolescence of communism is another factor in this regard. Islamism emerged as the main alternative to communism/socialism among marginalized Muslims.

It is, however, very interesting that in 1991, Hasina and top Awami League leaders approached Ghulam Azam, the Jamaat patriarch in Bangladesh, to support Justice Badrul Haider Chowdhury, the Awami candidate in the presidential election in Bangladesh. Since the MPs elect the President, and the Jamaat had thirty seats in the Bangladesh parliament, their support could have benefited the Awami candidate.⁷⁸ Afterwards, Hasina and Awami leaders were very close to the top Jamaat leaders, including the party Chief Maulana Matiur Rahman Nizami during 1991–1996, when they were together against the BNP government under Khaleda Zia. Interestingly (as discussed in Chap. 6), later in 2013–2014, the Hasina government tried Jamaat leaders as “war criminals” (of the Liberation War), and condemned Nizami and others to death.

Again, contrary to conventional wisdom, Islamism is no longer the monopoly of the mullah. In Bangladesh, the bulk of the Jamaat-e-Islami cadres, if not the leaders, are not madrasa-educated mullahs, but are from the various petty-bourgeois classes representing the middle and poor peasantry, petty businessmen and shopkeepers, school teachers and other underemployed and unemployed classes.⁷⁹ Many of them can be classified as members of the peripheral “vernacular elite” or graduates from Bengali medium institutions—the least preferred in the private sector job market. They nourish a tremendous sense of deprivation and, like their Algerian, Egyptian and Iranian counterparts, have the potential to turn very violent and anarchical. And their madrasa-educated counterparts—even poorer and almost totally unemployable in both the public and private sectors other than in low-paid teaching positions or as employees of mosques—are also

angry and frustrated with anything that goes in the name of secularism and modernism. Historically, the replacement of Hindu landed and professional elite in the wake of the Partition, non-Bengali elite after the Liberation of 1971, and of English-educated elite in the name of Bengali nationalism by the relatively inferior and unskilled people has been responsible for social disorder, political chaos and economic mismanagement. The ongoing triangular conflict among modernists in line with globalization, Bengali nationalists and Islamists in the country is reflective of the situation.

While the well-organized Jamaat has been gaining legitimacy in the eyes of many—including President Jimmy Carter—for adopting constitutional politics, a section of the mullahs, mainly the pro-establishment *pirs* and others without any firm base, have remained vacillating and opportunistic. They are very critical of the Jamaat as well. Pir Fazlul Karim of Charmonai, for example, on the one hand, was critical of female leadership and of the Jamaat for lending support to female leadership (considering it un-Islamic), and on the other hand, he extolled the attributes of General Ershad, widely known for his corruption and promiscuity. “Despite all his faults, Ershad has two virtues—firstly, he is a man; and secondly, he has formally repented for his sins,” so goes the eulogy.⁸⁰ The *pir*, among many other clerics, wanted to withdraw female students from all schools in the country, especially those “who look older than their age.”⁸¹ As one does not take these *pirs*, who have hardly any political leverage, seriously, so one does not give any credence to the non-cleric politicians with regard to their pro-Islamic rhetoric. G.M. Qader (Ershad’s brother), an MP from the Jatiya Party (Ershad Group), having very little influence on the people, for example, wanted to table a bill in parliament to make the saying of prayer five times a day obligatory for every Bangladeshi Muslim. Otherwise, he demanded, they should be jailed and liable to pay a hefty fine.⁸² It seems radical Islamic rhetoric is their only way to make room for themselves in the political arena of Bangladesh.

The mutual vilification of the two parties indicates how the country is sharply polarized between the pro-and anti-Awami League camps, the former representing “liberal democracy” and “pro-Liberation forces” and the latter, “pro-Islam” and “anti-Indian” viewpoints. The Awami League tries to get dividends by projecting the BNP as “anti-Liberation” for its electoral alliance with the Jamaat, which actively collaborated with the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971. The circulation of an English booklet

on the eve of President Clinton's trip to Bangladesh in March 2000 by the Awami League government may be mentioned in this regard. This was an attempt to vilify the BNP-led opposition group as "Islamist terrorist," a *bête noire* to the US. It was also an attempt to establish the Awami League as the only liberal democratic alternative in the country. The booklet contained sensational information about the "impending threat" of terrorist attacks on Clinton by Islamic militants. One is not sure if this led to the cancellation of the President's scheduled trip to a village around thirty kilometres off Dhaka to meet female members of the Grameen Bank. It is also widely believed that the Awami League government resorted to the same trick immediately after 9/11 (on the eve of the parliamentary elections of October 2001) by pasting posters on city walls in Dhaka, portraying BNP leaders as "pro-Taliban," "friends of Osama bin Laden." And as we know, both major parties of Bangladesh adopt expedient slogans and policies for the sake of power. As the Awami League has no qualms about using the Islamic card for political leverage, so is the rival BNP, which does not hesitate to portray it as the champion of liberal democracy and nationalism. It would not be an over-simplification that Hasina and her Awami League's concerted efforts to project Khaleda and the BNP-Jamaat coalition government (2001–2006) as "pro-Bin Laden" struck a chord with the US and West as a whole. Hence the sudden shift of support from the BNP to the Awami League in the West!

Not only Hasina have been tirelessly demonizing the BNP-Jamaat as sponsors of Islamist terrorism, but her son Sajib Wazed Joy has also been doing the same. In November 2008, he co-authored a paper, "Stemming the Rise of Islamic Extremism in Bangladesh" in the *Harvard International Review*, which argued that the Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP were behind Islamist terrorism in the country. It also accused the Bangladesh Army and paramilitary forces of recruiting thousands of "Islamic fundamentalist terrorists" and claimed (with no reference) that 35 per cent of the Army recruits were from the madrasas (as if madrasas had been the mainstay of Islamist terrorism!), and it asked for its immediate discontinuation.⁸³ In November 2009, Joy also publicly vilified Bangladeshi Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus as a "sympathizer" of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh, at a workshop at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Honolulu, Hawaii, where this writer was a Professor of Security Studies at that time.

Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that most “secular” leaders use Islamic rhetoric and join hands with Islamist parties for political leverage, from time to time. The BNP uses the Islamic card, firstly, to neutralize the Awami League, and secondly, to appease the vast majority of God-fearing and anti-Indian Bengali Muslims. As discussed above, the Awami League has never been lagging behind in this regard. Its signing an electoral alliance with Islamist Khilafat Majlis in December 2006 to establish Shariah law in Bangladesh was a major step to portray itself as “Islam-pasand” or “Islam-loving,” which is a Pakistani legacy since 1947. Hasina’s Awami League also used the Jamaat in 1986 by taking part in the parliamentary elections together with the Islamist party, apparently to legitimize the Ershad Regime, but actually, to contain its arch political rival BNP, which had been dead against taking part in any elections under General Ershad. As elaborated in Chap. 6, Hasina had again no qualms with hanging her old political allies, top Jamaat leaders as so-called war criminals, through a sham tribunal and compliant judges, when they had shifted their allegiance from Hasina’s Awami League to Khaleda’s BNP. It has also been discussed how Hasina killed hundreds of leaders and followers of a newly emerging, bubble-like Islamist outfit called the Hefazat-e-Islam of Bangladesh (The Protectors of Islam in Bangladesh) in the wee hours of 5 and 6 May 2013 to intimidate Islamists and other opponents of her totalitarian regime. She then bought off some top Hefazat leaders and almost fully neutralized them.

About six months after the massacre of hundreds of Hefazat-e-Islam supporters by police and BGB troops in May 2013, on 14 January 2014, Al Qaeda’s Ayman al-Zawahiri—the most important leader of the terror outfit after Osama bin Laden’s death—posts a thirty-minute-long video message, titled “Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence” through Al Qaeda’s As-Sahab Media, where he urges a popular uprising (*intifada*) against the government and “anti-Islamic forces” in Bangladesh. He calls on the Muslims of Bangladesh “to confront the crusader onslaught against Islam,” which, “is being orchestrated by the leading criminals in the Subcontinent and the West against Islam.” He believes thousands of Islamic scholars were killed in the streets of Bangladesh.⁸⁴ This writer is well aware of the Zawahiri video but is in total disagreement with the hyped-up, motivated and extremely biased assertions by certain Western, Indian and Bangladeshi analysts, scholars and journalists who have been hell-bent to prove that

Bangladesh—among other Muslim-majority countries along with India, Sri Lanka, several European countries and America—are going to be soft targets of Islamist terrorist attacks. This sort of sensational writings and yellow journalism is around since the 1990s. Since days after 9/11, as mentioned above, Western journalists like Bertil Lintner, Eliza Griswold and their likes have been assiduously engaged in portraying countries like Bangladesh as “cocoons of Islamist revolutions.”

They frequently mention the following (and some other) Islamist terror outfits, who they claim are going to destabilize Bangladesh through Islamist terrorism: The Proscribed militant groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, Harakatul-Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the newly formed Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), among others. “Existing militant groups like HUJI-B and JMB have tried to restructure themselves under the names Tanzim e-Tamiruddin and BEM,” claims Animesh Roul. He also claims (absolutely with no evidence, whatsoever that many Pro-Jamaat-e-Islami members of the *Islami Chhatro Shibir*, after the hanging of some Jamaat leaders as “war criminals” have swelled the ranks of Hefazat-e-Islam.⁸⁵ British journalist Joseph Allchin’s recent book on Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, which also mentions dozens of obscure (and possibly non-existing) Islamist groups, who are said to have orchestrated the Holey Artisan terror attack in Dhaka on 1 July 2016. Allchin, deliberately or out of sheer ignorance about the truth has simply reproduced the Hasina government’s official versions of the real or pseudo-Islamist terror attacks in Bangladesh during the past twenty years or so.⁸⁶ Last but not least, undoubtedly, some radical Islamist terrorists were behind the killing of twenty-odd people (mostly Japanese) at the Holey Artisan Café, there is no way of proving or disproving any ISIS connection with the attack. We know the so-called ISIS webpage *Amaq* published live pictures of the Holey Artisan victims, but there is no proof that the website really belonged to and was operated by ISIS activists. One is not sure if the Holey Artisan attack was a false-flag operation or another the home-grown Islamist terror attack by alienated, angry, secular-educated, urban youths from rich families in the country!

Although there is no denying that several Islamist terror outfits till the recent past (up to the Holey Artisan Café attack in July 2016) resorted to small and not-so-small terrorist attacks in Bangladesh have been home-grown terror groups inspired by Al Qaeda, ISIS and their likes. Despite

hyped-up media reports and writings by terrorism and Islam “experts” in the West and East, this writer has not yet tracked down any direct links between international terrorist groups and their alleged local variants. Even the Holey Artisan attack, despite their links with the so-called ISIS webpage *Amaaq* (which experts believe is an India-based pseudo-ISIS mouthpiece), was a false-flag operation. As mentioned above, despite the so-called proliferation of the so-called Islamist terrorist outfits in Bangladesh since early 2000, no major terrorist attack has ever taken place in the country. Why so, is beyond our imagination! Slightly more than a year after the Holey Artisan attack, Christine Fair and Wahid Abdallah published their report on “Islamic Militancy in Bangladesh” in the RESOLVE network in September 2017. The Fair-Abdallah Report admits, as of 2017, only around 5 per cent of Bangladeshi Muslims had any support for any violent Islamist extremist group in the country. It also reveals that “contrary to popular theories about causal links between poverty and support for violent extremism,” some well-to-do and educated people (mostly women) also had a soft corner for the phenomenon; and that many survey respondents did not want to speak openly about violent extremism in the country. One wonders, why they did not remain anonymous! The Report mainly focuses on three major terror attacks in the country since 2005, when 500 “small bombs,” which were actually non-lethal fire-crackers were blasted across the country. The other two incidents were the killing of an atheist publisher in 2015; and the Holey Artisan attack, allegedly by ISIS activists.⁸⁷ This Report along with hundreds of similar writings in this genre, mostly by Western and Indian analysts lack any objectivity. But they thrive as the politically motivated stories about “Islamist terror” sell well in the West and East!

As this writer has argued elsewhere:

Politicians and law-enforcers in Bangladesh, from time to time, hype up both panic and complacency by publicizing the following: “terrorists everywhere” or “no terrorists anywhere”, in the country. The ambivalence is counterproductive Terrorism is ideology-driven violence, different from violent crime and warfare. Terrorism is a deviation, something out of the ordinary; there’s no ordinariness about it like crime, epidemic, floods, or earthquake. It’s a symptom of the disease, not the disease itself ... the problem of terrorism has

deeper roots than the alienation of some rich kids. Is there any problem of mass alienation of people from society, politics, and state—which they consider corrupt, cruel, and lacking in legitimacy? David Galula, the guru of counterinsurgency (COIN) operators in the world (although this French expert came from the losing side of the War in Algeria), believes CT-COIN is “eighty per cent political, and twenty per cent military.”⁸⁸

Islam and Problematic Female Empowerment

Any appraisal of Islamic identity, political Islam and Islamist extremism in the country remains incomplete without highlighting the problem of misogyny and persecution of women by adherents of popular Islam, who come in many colours and hues. All of them are not madrasa-educated or uneducated/semi-literate village folks, but many of them are highly educated, well-placed people from cities. Then again, so far as the exploiters of women in Bangladesh are concerned, paradoxically they also represent “liberal democrat,” “secular,” and even “enlightened promoters” of “female empowerment” and “human rights.” I have discussed this in some detail in my book on women and Islam in Bangladesh.⁸⁹

Taslima Nasrin (b. 1962), a medical doctor-turned-feminist writer, wrote books and essays on Islam and patriarchy in Bangladesh in the early 1990s. Her vitriolic and obscene writings against Islam in general, and Muslim clerics, in particular, antagonized not only mullahs but a cross section of the Muslim population in the country. Already very controversial and unpopular among both Islamists and others in Bangladesh for advocating free sex and other maverick ideas, including the merger of Bangladesh with the Indian state of West Bengal, Nasrin endeared many Indians. In early 1993, for her fiction *Lajja*, which portrays the plight of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh—paradoxically in the wake of the killing of thousands of Muslims in India during and after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in late 1992—Nasrin became very popular among Hindu militants in India. Her novelette, soon translated into English and several other Indian languages, grossly exaggerated the plight of Hindus in Bangladesh by singling out the Jamaat-e-Islami workers as members of the killer- rapist-abductor gangs.⁹⁰ Not long after the publication of *Lajja*, a couple of obscure mullahs from the periphery issued the so-called *fatwa-to-kill*

against the author. Soon, they denied having issued such a fatwa. Despite their denial, the Indian and Western media publicized the so-called death threat portraying Bangladesh as another “Islamic” country with all its negative attributes, turning Nasrin into their Salman Rushdie and the two mullahs into the protégés of Ayatollah Khomeini.⁹¹ Nasrin’s alleged remarks made to Indian media in 1994 suggesting to “rewrite the Quran” enraged the bulk of the Bangladeshi Muslims, and this finally led to her expulsion from the country. The wide coverage of the Taslima episode in the Indian and Western media has convinced many that Bangladesh is not different from other “Islamic” countries vis-à-vis their intolerance and obscurantism.

While the Taslima episode was drawing world attention, persecution of rural women in the name of Islamic justice was occurring in the countryside. The cruel and illegal acts of the traditional village courts, or *salish*, was very disturbing to human rights activists and others. The public trial of poor women by village elders and mullahs, which led to several deaths of the victims, convinced many in the West and elsewhere about the “impending” ascendancy of the Islamic extremists to power in Bangladesh. The fatwa controversy came to the limelight in the 1990s after the local media, NGOs and donors took exception to the persecution of rural women in the name of Islam. Poor rural women, often victims of rape by influential villagers or those alleged to have cohabited with their former husbands after being divorced, are punished for committing adultery. Sometimes influential village elders force them to remarry someone as penance to committing adultery through the *salish*. The village mullah, totally dependent on village elders for sustenance, play the vital role in justifying the “judgements” in the name of Shariah law. In late 2000, one Shahida, a village woman at Naogaon district in northern Bangladesh, fell victim to a *salish* verdict and was forced to commit suicide. Wide publicity of the incident led to the High Court verdict declaring the dispensing of fatwas illegal on January 1, 2001.⁹²

The influential Jamaat-e-Islami, several Islamic groups and hundreds of ulama condemned the judgement as un-Islamic and the judges as *murtads* (apostates).⁹³ While late Maulana Fazlul Karim, the influential *pir* (Sufi) of Charmonai—as mentioned above, opposed female leadership, and was quite soft on military dictator General Ershad, who in 1988, made Islam the “State Religion” of Bangladesh—the chief of the Islamic Constitution

Movement, condemned the judgement, Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini threatened to launch a “Taliban-style Revolution” in Bangladesh to counterpoise the “enemies of Islam.”⁹⁴ Islamic zealots were on the rampage at Brahmanbaria, Chittagong and certain other places, chanting anti-government and pro-Taliban slogans: “*Amra sabai Taliban, Bangla habe Afghan*” (We are all Taliban and will turn Bangladesh into another Afghanistan).⁹⁵ Although most liberal-democrats favoured the anti-fatwa judgement, the government, being apprehensive of the backlash, was thinking in terms of reviewing the judgement.⁹⁶

Soon the polarized polity witnessed the showdown between pro-fatwa clerics and anti-fatwa, pro-NGO *Nagorik Andolon* (Citizen’s Movement). Among others, the Pir of Charmonai, Mufti Amini and Mufti Azizul Haq, organized a grand pro-fatwa rally in Dhaka on February 2, 2001. Declaring the NGOs as the “number one enemy” of Islam and Bangladesh, the clerics blamed the Awami League government for appointing judges with bias against Islam.⁹⁷ The pro-NGO and anti-fatwa *Nagorik Andolon* confronted the clerics and asked the government to ban all religiously motivated political parties.⁹⁸ Under quite confusing and mysterious circumstances, a police constable was killed inside a mosque at Muhammadpur in Dhaka. The government put the blame on a section of the clerics for the murder and also for possessing “time bombs,” said to have been recovered from a madrassa at Muhammadpur.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, despite liberal democrat and leftist opposition, the government was considering the formation of a Shariah Board to issue fatwas in accordance with Islam and on behalf of the state.¹⁰⁰ However, there was wide acceptability of the fatwa-dispensing mullahs in the countryside. In January 2001, villagers at Nandigram in Bogra district, for example, damaged the vehicle of a Bangladesh Television crew, who went to interview one Maulana Ibrahim, who in 1995 came to the limelight for his famous anti-BRAC fatwa stirring up a big mob against the NGO. Villagers favoured clerics and despised NGOs.¹⁰¹ In sum, Bangladeshi Muslims, very similar to their counterparts in Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Egypt and some other Muslim-majority countries having poor records in the realms of bad governance and corruption have different ethical standards to keep their morality and piety-cum-rituals in different watertight compartments. Although Bangladeshi Muslims revere the ulama, *pirs* or Sufis, and Islam-oriented politicians, their most preferred

candidates at the polling stations are liberal democrats retired bureaucrats or military officers, or secular nationalist politicians mostly representing the three major political parties, BNP, Awami League and Jatiya Party.

Changing Dynamics of Islamism in Bangladesh and Beyond

Thanks to the changing dynamics of global politics and security issues in the post-9/11 world, especially in the US and among its allies in Europe, Israel, India and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, Islam and Muslims have become the new “others” or objects of hate and retaliation against genuine or false-flag Islamist terror attacks. Since late 2001, the new “others” have become the new victims of Western, Israeli and Indian “retaliatory” or “pre-emptive” attacks, very similar to what communist or pro-communist North Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and others went through during the Cold War. Demonising Islam and Muslims à la communism and communists in the Cold War era is the neo-McCarthyism today. Thus, the growing Islamophobia in the West and among its allies have made any objective appraisal of Islam and Islamist terror in Bangladesh (or elsewhere) is an arduous task for any scholar. Islamophobia today is not only another dimension of Western Orientalist prejudice against the religion and its adherents, but also a well-orchestrated and cleverly designed propaganda warfare against Muslims, mainly to serve two purposes: (a) to perpetuate Western hegemony in the resource-rich and strategically important Muslim World, from the shores of southern Mediterranean to the African heartland and the Indian Ocean; and (b) to benefit the Western military-industrial complex, which only flourishes when it can sell useful or useless weapons (including the most-maligned weapons of mass destruction [WMDs]) to defend themselves from Islamist terror attacks to as many countries as possible, albeit selectively.¹⁰² One may mention a few such prejudicial, sketchy and utterly nonsensical pieces of writings on Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh alone, besides the one by Bertil Lintner, which has been cited above.¹⁰³ I cite the summary of a sensational and a grossly prejudicial piece, “Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh” by the CRS in the US, just to highlight what is being produced in the West to demonize Islam and Muslims, in Bangladesh and beyond:

There is concern among observers that the secular underpinnings of moderate Bangladesh are being undermined by a culture of political violence and the rise of Islamist extremists. A further deterioration of Bangladesh's democracy and political stability may create additional space within which Islamist militants may be increasingly free to operate. Such a development may have destabilizing implications for Bangladesh, South Asia, and the Islamic world. *They also have the potential to undermine U.S. interests.* [Emphasis added]¹⁰⁴

In the backdrop of the extremely prejudiced Islamophobic writings on Islamism in general, and particularly in Bangladesh, it is imperative that we warn subscribers of such over-simplified and biased writings on Islamism in Bangladesh that “Islamist terrorism” is very different from the politically incorrect “Islamic terrorism,” and that the phenomenon is only around thirty-year-old never existed before the end of the Cold war in 1990. As one Western analyst has explained why ordinary peace-loving people become terrorists: “Humiliation is the strongest force that creates rifts and breaks down relationship among people Men such as Osama bin Laden would never have followers if there were no victims of humiliation in many parts of the world.”¹⁰⁵ Nobody should underestimate the phenomenal Islamization of the Bangladeshi Muslim culture—which is visible in the growing popularity of hijab, a growing number of mosques and madrasas, and the growing influence of Islamic rhetoric in every sphere of life. If the country remains a one-party autocracy, the lack of democracy might lead to violent Islamist terrorism in the near future, which would destabilize the country for years.

As discussed above, ruling parties in Bangladesh frequently use Islamic groups or resort to crying wolf policy by raising alarms about impending Islamist terrorist attacks. Of late, as political analysts believe and circumstantial pieces of evidence suggest, the one-party Hasina Regime resorted to using an ultra-orthodox Islamist group, the *Hefazat-e-Islam*, by inducing sections of its pro-Hasina leaders to stage mock but very violent demonstrations against the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Bangladesh's independence on 26 March 2021. Consequently, there were week-long violent protests and rioting on streets in Dhaka, Chittagong, Brahman Baria and elsewhere in

the country. Around twenty protesters got killed at the hands of the police, who were mostly poor madrasa students mobilized by *Hefazat* leaders. They were dead against Modi's visit, as he is also known as the "Butcher of Gujarat" for his complicities in the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 while Modi was the Chief Minister of the Indian province. It is widely believed that Hasina staged the rioting to gain support from Western governments by portraying her government as the only champion of democracy and secularism in Bangladesh.¹⁰⁶ Last but not least, thanks to the overall deterioration of the education system in the country, which mostly produces unemployable and under-employable graduates, the proliferation of madrasas, and the phenomenal Islamization of the polity since the late 1970s, the bulk of the Muslim youths are thoroughly Islamized and de-secularized to such an extent that secularism has almost become synonymous with Islamophobia, assiduously nurtured by America, Israel and India. This attitude of Bangladeshi Muslim youths may be attributed to growing Indian hegemonic designs in the country, and India's close ties with the West and Israel.

Although fatalist peasant masses—who are mostly resigned to their miserable fate—are not posing a threat to the law and order situation; the real danger comes from the disgruntled lower-middle classes and the various lumpen elements in society. The broken promises of the successive governments since independence, which have delivered more of the same—hollow promises, corruption, unemployment and misery, adversely affecting the loyalty of the petty bourgeoisie and the fast disappearing middle classes—may trigger the rise of Islamism (violent and non-violent) as the alternative to liberal democratic, leftist and secular politics. This, however, would not signal the ascendancy of Islamic militants and anti-Hindu communal forces to power. Despite the alarmist views of some Western analysts, governments and their local adherents in Bangladesh, who seemingly have been influenced by Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, the ascendancy of Islam to political power in Bangladesh would not destabilize the region. However, the persecution and suffering of Muslims, for example in the Middle East and India, continue to arouse sympathy for their coreligionists and anger against their actual and perceived persecutors among the bulk of the Bangladeshi Muslims. Their solidarity with fellow Muslims elsewhere does not necessarily mean that Bangladeshi Muslims have turned terrorists, posing a threat to global order and democracy.

Thanks to the proliferation of the so-called Islam, terrorism and Bangladesh experts in the West and East, who understand neither Islam nor terrorism—and are far less qualified to correlate the two with objectivity and scholarship with regard to Bangladesh—nobody can make any sense of what “experts” like Christine Fair, Eliza Griswold, Selig Harrison, Bertil Lintner, Tariq Karim, Hiranmay Karlekar, Dan Morrison and their ilk (cited above) have written on the “impending threat” of an Islamist takeover of the country since 9/11.

Many, if not most, of the above analysts’ alarmist views on radical Islamism in Bangladesh have been a by-product of the hyped-up CT operations in the US (and in several Western countries and India) since 9/11. These studies may be imputed to the availability of lots of research funding to demonize Islam and Muslims out of sheer geopolitical reasons and Islamophobia in the post-Cold War world, when the West is in desperate need to create another monstrous enemy to replace the Soviet Union by the ubiquitous Islamist terror. Thus, politically motivated bureaucrats, CT and COIN experts, military personnel, journalists and scholars/researchers—who also know narratives on Islamist terror and insurgency sell well—have been mostly producing biased, motivated and useless writings on Islamist terror in different parts of the world, including Bangladesh. Autocratic regimes in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the Muslim World and beyond also lend support to the narrative of the “impending” Islamist terror attacks in various Afro-Asian countries. Thus, scholars, journalists and other beneficiaries of the discourse of Islamist terror tend to exaggerate the degree, intensity and potential of Islamist terror attacks by citing the wishful thinking of various Islamist terror outfits, including Al Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, HUJI, JMB, LeT, MILF and their ilk. Autocratic regimes in the Muslim World, including the one under Hasina in Bangladesh, get political dividends by projecting themselves as champions of freedom and secularism, if not democracy. Had there been any substance in writings projecting “impending” mega Islamist terror attacks in Bangladesh, the country would not have been almost totally free from such attacks since the turn of the century. The authoritarian Hasina Regime since 2009 have been resorting to extra-judicial killings of thousands of political dissidents across the country through police, RAB and Awami League operatives/vigilantes in the name of CT operations to save the country from Islamist terrorism. We know Islamic resurgence and

Islamist insurgency and terrorism are not necessarily positively correlated. While Islamic resurgence in the polity is almost exclusively a phenomenon by default, Islamist terrorism is definitely by design. However, as we know, almost all the stories about the “impending” rise of Islamist terrorism, or even Islamist takeovers of the country are politically motivated campaigns by Western and Indian analysts think tanks and institutions run by the military-industrial lobby and civil-military geo-strategists in the West who want to contain the Sino-Pakistani-Iranian axis. And we also know the Hasina Regime’s frequent use of the Islamist bogey and cry wolf diplomacy have been behind most stories about Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh ever since the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York in 2001.

The following studies, done after the Holey Artisan Café attack in July 2016—purportedly by terrorists linked with ISIS—represent the sensationalist Western version of the story, not that different from the official version of the Hasina Regime.¹⁰⁷ These sensational studies are very similar to the hyper-sensationalist ones produced by analysts/journalists like Bertil Lintner, Eliza Griswold, Selig Harrison (cited above) and others in the first 5/6 years following 9/11. However, there are balanced and objective studies of the phenomenon called “Islamist Terrorism” from the global and Bangladesh perspectives.¹⁰⁸ The Islamization of the Muslim World and individual Muslims—which hinges on the dynamics of Globalization and economic uncertainties—are more cultural/ritualistic than political. In sum, a ritualistic Bangladeshi Muslim is not necessarily an honest person, let alone a supporter of political Islam and Islamist terrorism. He/she is least Islam-oriented or devotional, but thanks to the teachings of the mullah (who are also least devotional) draw a line between sin and crime. He/she only cares about the reward and punishment in the hereafter, which Muslims believe God will dispense to good (ritualistic/believers) and bad (non-ritualistic/non-believers) Muslims, respectively. As elaborated in Chap. 9, since the collective culture of the Bangladeshis in general justify and even promotes corruption in all possible forms, the cultural Islamization of the polity has not made any difference in the day-to-day behaviour of the people. They have neither become more Islamist politically nor been more enthused by Islamist terrorist outfits like Al Qaeda and ISIS than before. Thus, nothing could be more redundant than the studies on the so-called rise in the popularity of Islamist political parties or Islamist terror outfits in Bangladesh in the coming years.

Concluding Observations

We need to understand the ambivalence of Bangladeshi Muslims—who roughly represent 90 per cent of the population—with regard to their national identity. Up to the Partition of 1947, they had been delusional about their ethnonational identity, believing themselves to be the offspring of Turco-Arab, Iranian-Afghan, or Central Asian Muslim settlers in India. However, soon after the creation of Pakistan, they started their epical homecoming to Bengal, considering it as their ancestral home. Although the emergence of Bangladesh signalled the victory of secular nationalism against Islam-oriented Pakistani nationalism, yet Mujib's reliance on secularism and socialism turned off most Bangladeshis, who are Muslim. Hence the rise of political and spiritual Islam in Bangladesh! This chapter appraises the main factors behind the Islamization process, and its short- and long-term effects on society, politics and the economy of the country. And, it also appraises the adverse effects of state-sponsored Islamization and false-flag operations against so-called Islamist terrorists under the Hasina government since 2009. Most importantly, political Islam is a by-product of the Cold War and post-Cold War global politics. First, the West sponsored political Islam, including “jihad” against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Since the defeat of the Soviet Union did not empower the poor and backward Muslims, many of them, globally, continued with their version of the “jihad.” Then the West's post-9/11 demonization of Islam and Muslims further agitated Muslims everywhere. Bangladesh was no exception in this regard. Meanwhile, millions of poor, semi-literate Bangladeshi Muslims' exposure to the Middle East as wage labourers from the 1970s onwards had Islamized them culturally. This explains the Arabization of the lower-class Muslims and the mass “hijabization” of their women. Elected and unelected governments, political, business and professional elites and bureaucrats also started championing ritualistic Islam for the sake of legitimacy. Most of them espouse Islam out of sheer hypocrisy to become respectable. Cultural Islamization of the polity of Bangladesh is not synonymous with the rise of political Islam or Islamist terrorism. Islam in Bangladesh has become integral to people's identity without turning them into God-fearing or honest. In short, the government uses Islam for legitimacy, and people use it as their identity. Both the government and the people espouse Islam without committing to Islamic ethics and values, at all.

In short, there is no evidence to suggest that the rise in the number of madrasas, mosques, mosque-goers and people who have performed the Hajj is correlated with the rise in god-fearing and honest Muslims in Bangladesh. In this way, the apparent Islamization of the polity represents the dark side of ignorance, hypocrisy and intolerance in the name of Islam. Thus, this chapter is not mainly an assessment of Islamist terrorism in the country, which from time to time since 1999 have caused tension with crude homemade bombs and killings of individuals. We know, the latest and largest instance of Islamist terrorism occurred in Dhaka, where more than twenty people were killed at the Holi Artisan Cafe in July 2016. Since Islamist terrorism has never been the primary aspect of Islamism or political Islam in the country, this study has also shed light on the cultural dimension of Islamic orthodoxy along with ignorance and intolerance that has permeated the society since the 1980s.

Anyone familiar with the history, society and culture of Bangladesh, including its politics since Liberation, knows that this country's emergence marked the end of political Islam under Pakistan, however, not long after the Liberation of the country, Islam re-emerged more forcefully than ever. "Absolute faith in Allah" replaced "Secularism" as one of the state ideologies in the first decade of Post-Liberation Bangladesh. However, by the end of the second decade, Islam became the "State Religion," which no subsequent government has been able to drop from the Constitution. Even if these changes appear to be merely cosmetic or inconsequential, one must be concerned about the gradual and persistent rise of ritualistic Islam, which is simultaneously intolerant, ultra-orthodox and obscurantist—almost completely devoid of Islamic ethics and spirituality. Although this variant of Islam represents the "Little Traditions" of the faith, due to the growing influence of the obscurantist and semi-educated Maulanas, Muftis and Sheikhs, these traditions are being sold as the "Great Traditions." The majority of Muslim clerics in the country follow the Hadith literature and interpret Islam according to Deoband School of thought, Saudi Wahhabism, Maulana Maududi's writings and obscure Islamic and Islamist groups. Since the mid-1970s, Bangladeshi labourers have been exposed widely to the Middle East, embracing "Islamic attire," Wahhabi orthodoxy and intolerance. They have profoundly moulded popular Islam among the lower and lower-middle classes in Bangladesh. As the number of madrasas, mosques and mosque-goers has risen exponentially, so has the prevalence

of proto-Wahhabi clerics, who preach hatred and violence against the West, India, women, liberal democracy and secularism. Last but not least, the marriage of convenience between the peddlers of illiberal Islam and the corrupt political and business elites has turned the polity of Bangladesh into one of the most illiberal, intolerant, dogmatic and hypocritical anywhere in the world. Because of the sharp decline in education, mainly due to the proliferation of the backward Bengali medium, we are now seeing an increased number of “vernacular elites”—as discussed above—Oliver Roy has used the expression to denote people who are among the least competitive in their professions, as well as among the most gullible followers of corrupt leaders and semi-educated mullahs, in Algeria in the recent past. Liberal education and liberalism have also declined, while illiberal and intolerant Islamo-supremacists have become very influential at every level of society. Therefore, some clerics can publicly state with total impunity that Muslims who grab non-Muslim properties will not suffer divine retribution. According to another influential mullah, who is unaware of science, astronomy and geography, the core of the earth is home to another world inhabited by intelligent beings. On the internet and YouTube, they also preach hate speeches against democracy, secularism, secular Muslims and non-Muslims. Their Bangladeshi Muslim followers number in the millions. Thus, the apparent tug of war between “democratic-secular” and obscurantist Islamist forces in Bangladesh is very important in understanding why the country is among the least developed in the world.

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9. “Culture Matters”: Towards Understanding the Crisis of Culture in Bangladesh

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Even the poorest and least articulate layers of society have considerable potential for resisting and obstructing measures intended to coerce them.

—Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, Vol. 1, Pantheon, New York 1968, p. 66

The historian may not erase or rewrite the past to make it more pleasing; and the economist whose easy assumption that every country is destined to develop sooner or later, must be ready to look hard at failure.

—David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 1998, p. 5

Keywords Max Weber – Oscar Lewis – Martin Luther – William Kornhauser – “Mass society” – David Landes – “Culture matters” – Jeffrey Sachs – Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson – Samuel Huntington – Meiji Restoration

Main Arguments and Hypotheses

East Bengal was historically ruled by foreigners until 1971, so it lacks a tradition of self-rule and is unfamiliar with government machinery,

governance, urbanization and the concept of the rule of law. Because foreign rulers, as well as the average West Pakistani administrator and politician, always viewed Bengalis as their subjects, while “government” has always remained alien and elusive to Bengalis. The Bangladeshi tradition holds that *rajniti*, the Bengali word for politics, literally means “policies or principles of the rulers,” so politics or governance is not something ordinary people should be involved in or interested in. Thus, concepts such as self-rule, democracy, elections, parliament, legitimate government and so on remain elusive to many. Neither the British colonial rulers nor their successors in Pakistan cared much about introducing proper democracy and legitimate governments to the region. It is too ambitious to ape democratic institutions in countries such as Bangladesh or Pakistan, which are much like Britain under Cromwell or France under Napoleon Bonaparte, which took several centuries to introduce democracy and accountable government. Plassey villagers remained indifferent to Robert Clive’s installation of a new nawab after the battle. Bangladesh’s ordinary people tend not to interfere in the running of the state unless there is extreme hardship, terror and lawlessness in the country. Their political culture justifies corruption, bribery, debauchery, nepotism, dynastic rule and premodern institutions. This can be seen in the popularity of dictators like General Ershad and Sheikh Hasina. In a country where no political party has intra-party democracy, one wonders how democracy can flourish. The people have a collective memory of centuries of foreign rule and the rulers’ promotion of exclusive, rather than inclusive, political and economic institutions, as well as the state’s extractive nature, which has actually become a part of their political culture. People’s alienation from the state in pre-British Bengal was due to the state’s ownership of arable land, pastures and marketplaces. As a result, this alienation has profoundly influenced their collective political culture.

In part due to the topography of the country, caused by the endemic flooding, people are isolated from each other due to the fact that they cannot move from place to place during the long monsoon and floods. Of late there has been a better network of roads and bridges in the country. Physical isolation has led to a variety of dialects being spoken within 20–30 miles of each other (similar to Papua New Guinea). This variation is not evident in other parts of the Subcontinent. Historically, physical isolation has strengthened regionalism and “tribalism” to such an extent that the

average Bangladeshi still regards their village or cluster of villages as their *desh* or country, unlike a Bengali from the Indian state of West Bengal who lives in an urban, arid region with better communication means. In consequence, Bangladesh's rural and quasi-urban populations do not feel very strongly affiliated with a nation-state. The average Bangladeshi, unlike the average Bengali in West Bengal, does not live in his *bari* or permanent abode but in his *basha* or temporary abode while he stays on his own property in Dhaka or anywhere else in the urban areas, beyond his ancestral home or *desher bari*. His *bari* is always in his ancestral village, and his "own people" or trustworthy *attiya-sajan* come from there as well. Since Bengalis in West Bengal live in *baris*, not in *bashas* or temporary abodes, so Kolkata does not look deserted during national holidays or religious holidays, whereas "half" of Dhaka looks deserted during holidays when millions rush to their original homes in the countryside. A Bangladeshi with a college education finds it difficult to express himself without a sub-regional accent, which is not the case for the average South Asian from India or Pakistan. Furthermore, it explains the strong clannish behaviour and nepotism in the arenas of politics, business and administration. This results in nepotism, favouritism and a clannish mentality in Bangladesh. Additionally, mass illiteracy has led to the predominance of "little traditions" at the expense of the "great traditions" of religion. In other words, what is called religion, particularly Islam, is not only syncretistic but also a reflection of peasant and tribal beliefs, superstitions and traditional lifestyles. Therefore, Bangladeshi Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are least willing to accept modified/modern versions of their faiths, if not rituals.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand culture as a key determinant, if not the sole determinant, of good governance and development. The cultural dimension of underdevelopment in other Third World countries and regions may be understood from this case study even though it focuses on Bangladesh. It aims to gauge the overall human behaviour based on the belief system, traditions and customary behaviour of the people at the top as well as at the grassroots level, along with their social, political and economic behaviours, hopes and aspirations. We examine the cultural dimension of underdevelopment in peasant economies, where the cherished "peasant utopia" of Wolf remains unattainable.¹ As Perez de Cuellar observes, "failures and frustrated expectations of development" ignite cultural tensions, wars and authoritarian regimes,

disrupting the development process, due to the undervaluation of the importance of human factors within a culture.²

In the early twentieth century, Max Weber began the debate by linking development and social change with religion and culture.³ The debate has not yet resolved the problem conclusively. Some scholars are still sceptical whether a set of values lead to poverty; and if particular religious belief systems or culture are conducive to growth and development. According to Weber, “rational organization” in the “ideal” state is the key to development. And this he thought reached its peak during the Calvinist Puritanism in Western Europe. While Weber has glorified Protestantism as the mother of “rational bourgeois capitalism” in Europe, he is dismissive of the Hindu (South Asian) disposition to bear with patience all worldly discomfort, eventually to escape it, as “traditional” and unproductive.⁴ The popular Islamic disposition is not that different from Hindu asceticism and escapism. However, we may assume that the problem of underdevelopment in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh could be slightly different from that of predominantly Hindu India. We may impute the backwardness of Bangladesh to what Weber has classified as “greedy adventurism” or the pirate mentality of the ruling elite, along with the mass inertia of the traditional peasant. And there is hardly any systematic study of the traditional, Muslim peasant community in Bangladesh with the backwardness of the country.

Here in this chapter, the approach is a bit different from what Oscar Lewis has done in his study of some poor families in Mexico. This is a study not only of the “culture of poverty” emanating out of poverty, which Lewis studied, but also about the culture that leads to poverty. We may agree with Lewis: “Poverty becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and creates a subculture of its own ... the culture of poverty cuts across regional, rural-urban, and even national boundaries.”⁵ This study, however, is neither ethnocentric nor oblivious of the fact that “the underdeveloped countries [in South Asia] are not the same as pre-capitalist underdeveloped feudal countries [of Europe], *but are the distorted, agrarian counterparts of the world capitalist system*” (emphasis added).⁶ This distortion is a by-product of postcolonial “recolonization” of the Third World by indigenous successors of neo-imperialism.

Since both “development” and “underdevelopment” are loaded concepts, in postmodern lexicon, countries devoid of democracy—despite their high GDP growth and per capita income, for example, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—are still underdeveloped. And, democracy implies the rule of law, and ensures freedom of expression, human rights and dignity, and equal opportunities for every citizen. As I have elaborated in the Introduction that countries having undemocratic and unaccountable governments, which violate human rights and dignity, and allow no freedom of expression is anything but developed. So, democracy is the precondition of development. However, leaders of some most advanced democracies, at times condescendingly and at times as realists believe the Orient and the Third World as a whole cannot handle democracy. Winston Churchill, known for his arrogance and colonial hangover, once observed that there could be no democracy east of Suez. However, there is nothing axiomatic about Churchill’s aphorism that no democracy could flourish in the Orient. He did not blame geography but held the “enduring” political culture of the Orient responsible for the promotion of something akin to “Oriental despotism,” in the Hegelian-Marxian sense of the expression. However, there is nothing permanent about any culture. As democracy does not sustain itself only in the Occident, so is there nothing so typical about “Oriental despotism” either. By the way, Churchill’s above assertion predates the rise of Japan and South Korea as a democracy. However, so far as a true democracy and accountable governance with equal rights and opportunities to all are concerned, the Orient—from the Philippines to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, and from Thailand to Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and beyond—is still devoid of these virtues.

Understanding culture in the “humanistic sense” of expression is essential to understand the complex relationship between culture and development.⁷ Like culture, “development” is also a loaded concept. According to Boutros-Ghali, we must give new meaning to the word, as “development” is emerging as “the most important intellectual challenge in the coming years.”⁸ We hear about “Protestant” and “Catholic” ethics, and “Asian” values with regard to growth and development, from scholars like Adam Smith, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, and in the recent past, from Gunnar Myrdal, Barrington Moore, Francis Fukuyama, Amartya Sen and others. Hegel and Marx have hardly any kind words about South Asia and its peasant mode of production. However, almost nothing substantial has

come off any press analysing the backwardness of Bangladesh holding its culture and values responsible for the malady. Consequently, it is not an easy task to arrive at the right analysis as to why Bangladesh, along with certain other sub-regions of the Subcontinent, has not only remained underdeveloped—socially, politically and economically—but also been in a state of stagnation and even retrogression. We believe Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” is the key to development. What he considered “personal greed” or personal interest can eventually lead to social progress; and is a necessary precondition to development.

Bangladeshi Political Culture

In view of the above, it is relevant to ask the following questions concerning the overall backwardness of Bangladesh: What is wrong with the popular culture of the people of Bangladesh? Is popular culture really a hindrance to good governance, growth and prosperity in the region? Is mass literacy good enough to transform the popular culture of the region, which among other things, promotes next worldliness, fatalism, escapism and glorifies death, not life, and poverty, not prosperity? Can modern elite—intellectuals, professionals and politicians, along with entrepreneurs—transform people’s culture at the grassroots level or nothing short of a Reformation, à la Martin Luther, can change the situation? Is there a way to get rid of the culture, which promotes, protects and glorifies corruption, often by rewarding highly corrupt officials and elected representative of the people, including heads of governments and state in Bangladesh?

Despite wishful thinking by many scholars, many of whom are avowed patriots; it is not easy to be optimistic about the future of Bangladesh unless sea change takes place in the realm of education and the political culture of the people. Bangladesh is an important country to study for our understanding of the “culture of poverty” which is not only about the culture which is a by-product of poverty, but also about the culture which, many believe, promotes poverty and backwardness. We have every reason to investigate why Bangladesh, which according to a UN report had higher per capita income in 1949 than that of any contemporary Far Eastern or Southeast Asian countries except for Japan and Singapore⁹ has emerged as one of the poorest, if not the poorest, in the Third World. It is a pertinent question why with better land-man-ratio than Japan’s or South Korea’s, for

example, Bangladesh is beyond any comparison with Japan, Korea or other developed countries. It is an enigma that Bangladesh being one of the least developed and corrupt countries in the world do not witness any significant social or political unrest against the corrupt, rich and powerful people, and those who run the government, who are also corrupt, ruthless and indifferent to people's needs and aspirations.

It seems, the culture of complacency and fatalism has a positive correlation with poverty and vice versa. We need to understand whether the values, which promote complacency and fatalism, are conversely by-products of poverty or are derivatives of the overall socio-cultural and political situation of a country or region. According to Barrington Moore Jr., values do not drop from the heavens; they are acquired and can be taught and transmitted by leaders. Consequently, it can be assumed that the desired goals may be attained by the thorough transformation of the polity, mainly in the realms of administration, the belief systems, political culture and the levels of aspiration and expectation of the people at the grassroots level. If Moore is correct, nothing short of a miracle can transform the "culture of poverty" into that of growth, prosperity and development in the foreseeable future. The paradox the "culture of poverty" promotes is abysmal. The people under its spell are too happy with too few improvements in their living standards and any visible infrastructure development in their localities.

It is time to look at the problem of underdevelopment in Bangladesh through the prism of historical sociology and cultural anthropology, as the problem is more culture and less economic. One may agree that "social development is inseparable from economic development, and ... that the latter cannot be left to the attention of economists alone," as it is quite *"common for economists to note the importance of (non-economic) considerations, but usually only to ignore them [emphasis added]."*¹⁰ And, "development" goes beyond the economic well-being of a given population. We know "the aspiration to change, and institutional means for achieving it is central to present-day conceptions of development."¹¹ Both the quantitative growth in economic terms and the institutional development leading to the qualitative changes in the domains of politics, culture and society are essential for the overall development of any country, which are attaining peace, stability, good governance or the rule of law.

We must know why Japan, South Korea and Singapore, for example, with poorer land-man ratio than that of Bangladesh, are far more developed than the latter. Although one may agree with Fukuyama, “A study that tries to compare and contrast different cultures concerning economic performance is an open invitation to insult virtually everyone it touches upon,”¹² one cannot understand the “Bangladesh syndrome” without a comparative study of both the Western and Asian values with those of Bangladesh and other underdeveloped regions of the world. We need to understand if Bangladesh (and countries/regions in a similar situation) is just going through a short the transition of chaos and anarchy or is destined to be a “basket case,” to paraphrase Henry Kissinger, or a “luckless” country in the language of Eric Stokes.¹³

Although the state of governance depends on the cumulative political culture of the people concerned, this, however, does not mean that a well-entrenched oligarchy or Plato’s “Philosopher King” cannot transform the cumulative culture by establishing the rule of law, accountability and meritocracy. However, it is also true that the prevalence of the rule of law does not necessarily entail growth and prosperity in a region. The will to grow and prosper among the people play the most important role in improving the overall socio-political and economic conditions of a region. Consequently, there is no room for ethnocentrism in any objective study of democracy, growth and prosperity. Not only that, democracy and development do not always have positive correlations, but also the cultural constructs of the two may vary from place to place, country to country and time to time. Just as democracy and economic growth do not have positive correlations the same can be said of autocracy and economic decline and poverty. However, a mere change of governments through ballots does not entitle a country to the epithet “democratic.”

The magic formula that provides clues as to how to get rid of the “pathetic contentment” of the people would provide answers to most of the above questions. If the prevalence of so much corruption, violence, poverty and misery of the people does not breed discontent among the bulk of the population, one is not sure if they are really interested in changing/improving their lot. One is not sure if the so-called state of contentment is partially a reflection of their utter frustration and helplessness as well. Are they fatalists by default or choice? is the question. The average Bangladeshi (one may read “Indian” and “Pakistani” as well)

is a fatalist by choice as well. He has learnt from the half-educated mullah that accumulation of wealth is not virtuous and to “treat this world as a *musafirkhana* [or an inn/a temporary abode].” *Bauls* (mendicants), rural bards and writers like Hasan Raja have advised him not to build beautiful houses as death is imminent and this world is temporary. Kazi Nazrul Islam, the National Poet, has also glorified poverty, which according to him has elevated him to the status of another Jesus Christ. Rabindranath Tagore is possibly the only modern writer who writes: “I do not want to die in this beautiful world.” No one like Ulrich von Hutten, German poet and humanist of the Renaissance era, has ever sung in the region: “It is a joy to live!”

A look at its recent history and an empirical study of the present state of chaos, lawlessness and abject poverty of the people shows that Bangladesh has never enjoyed peace and prosperity in the last 200-odd years. The “Golden Bengal” or Sonar Bangla of Tagore is an ahistorical concept, a myth, which never existed, at least not for the ordinary Bengalis. However, this myth of abundance and prosperity, as expounded by Paul Greenough in his *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944*, has been the steering force behind all “nationalist” movements in the region since the mid-nineteenth century. The peasant masses’ desperation to get their mythical land of abundance led to the formation of Pakistan in 1947 in the region that is now Bangladesh. They in their quest for equality and justice—social as well as economic—targeted Hindu landlords and professionals, and finally created the eastern wing of Pakistan.

Soon the marshy, over-populated, underdeveloped predominantly Muslim region, which had been just a jute-producing hinterland of the industrialized, urban and predominantly Hindu region of western Bengal up to the Partition of 1947, again became disillusioned with Pakistani rulers. As the Pakistani ruling elite, predominantly non-Bengali Muslim Punjabis and north Indians did not treat East Bengali Muslims as equal partners, the latter were forced to fight for independence. And thus, Bangladesh came into being after much bloodshed in 1971. The creation of Bangladesh, despite all the promises made by its founding fathers, did not improve the condition of ordinary people. Rather the bulk of the population became much poorer and malnourished than they used to be under Pakistani rule during 1947–1971. The malady was not caused by a single factor.

What happened in the region in the Post-Liberation period was not altogether unexpected of a predominantly peasant economy like Bangladesh with rural-based, petty-bourgeois leaders dictated by the ethos of peasant culture and idiosyncrasies of the lumpen-proletariat. In short, ever since 1971, loose conglomerates of petty-bourgeois–peasant–lumpen proletariat elements, which constitute the vast majority, are running Bangladesh. This happened after the eclipse of the established middle class as the only dominant force—culturally, politically and economically—not long after the emergence of Bangladesh. The ascendancy of these classes as the political superordinates signalled their predominance in the socio-economic and cultural spheres as well. The rise of these people, who until 1971 had been the mainstay of the hoi polloi under Pakistani over lordship, which led to the emasculation, if not the total destruction of the middle classes in the country. The eclipse of the budding and not so well entrenched Bengali Muslim middle classes eventually led to the eclipse of the middle-class values, norms and culture. The middle-class political culture that promotes tolerance, trust, mutual respect, the rule of law and other prerequisites of democracy has been supplanted by “pre-political” culture of violence, mistrust, intolerance, defiance of law and authority, which promotes anarchy nourished by the marginalized underdogs like peasants, lumpen-proletariat and perpetually unhappy and incompetent petty-bourgeois classes.

The new elite emanating from peasant background has indigenized peasants’ envy and contempt for the non-peasant superordinate. Their poor educational background and overall incompetence have been reflected in their contempt for higher education, especially English medium institutions. The upshot has been the degeneration of education, art, music, cinema, literature and creativity as a whole. Ironically, these latecomers in the arena of politico-economic power soon promoted English-medium schools and started sending their children to prohibitively expensive schools and universities both within and outside the country, albeit by shunning their hitherto ultra-nationalist stunt for “Bengali (Bangali) nationalism.” However, their own drawbacks and inefficiency are well reflected in their rusticity, vulgarity, lack of respect and trust for others, parochialism, unrefined language, lack of refinement in taste and behaviour and proclivity to violence. Almost everything has a bearing on “pre-political” and premodern/pre-capitalist ways of life. Consequently, politicians, members

of parliament, teachers, students, priests, bureaucrats, businessmen, bankers, drivers, cooks and people, in general, are calling names and portraying each other as “traitors,” “liars,” “conspirators,” “enemies of the country,” “semi-educated,” “lame” and what not! The way the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition portray each other may be cited in this regard. What is reflected in the culture of name-calling and undermining each other is typical peasant behaviour. A peasant not only does not know how to respect, tolerate, thank or congratulate another, but is also unaware of the virtues of trust and peaceful co-existence with others besides his own clan members and immediate patrons. Hence the prevalence of the “holier-than-thou” mentality in almost every section of society. The lack of mutual trust is so pervasive that most commercial transactions are done through cash, as hardly anybody is willing to accept payment by cheques.

Ever since the restoration of democracy in 1991, several rounds of parliamentary elections have failed to legitimize the elected governments in the eyes of the opposition. The irony is that, for the sake of fairness, “caretaker governments” conducted most of these polls up to 2008. The main opposition parties since 1991 have been rejecting the polls as “rigged” hence unacceptable. This behaviour epitomizes the perennial lack of trust among peasants. We may argue that if Japan and South Korea could become democracies and developed, Bangladesh, which had exposure to a democracy long before them can become a democracy as well. This is not true that a country must first go through autocracy to develop, and then democratize itself, eventually! We may assume that Bangladesh is ready for democracy as the *raison d’être* for independent Bangladesh laid in the Bengali assertion for their democratic rights in erstwhile united Pakistan.

One wonders why the country has turned into a dysfunctional country. It was also the most corrupt country in the world, consecutively for five years in 2000–2005. While the rich are getting richer—mainly through unbridled corruption—there has been a state-sponsored campaign across the country to drastically deflate the number of absolute poor. As mentioned above, there is hardly any reliable statistics on anything about Bangladesh, or authentic references to historical events about the Liberation War, Sheikh Mujib’s or other leaders’ role in it, and important events before and after the Liberation, the country since Liberation, is marred with general strikes, road blocking, arson and violence before, during and after most general strikes,

rioting; and police brutality, including unaccountable extra-judicial killings of civilians are as common as tropical storms and monsoon rains. Boycott of the parliament by opposition members and the demand for the resignation of the elected government are frequent occurrences. The declaring of people, including the Prime Minister, as *persona non grata*, or “undesirable,” by political stalwarts in their localities is not uncommon. The lack of respect for democracy is so pervasive that even elected people’s representatives frequently face demands for their resignation, sometimes within days after their election. Then again, this chapter argues that the process is reversible. Honest and qualified leaders can one day develop Bangladesh as a liberal democracy.

The chapter argues that only through learning from their past mistakes, committed by the founding fathers during the last fifty years, Bangladesh can reverse the process of retardation albeit in the name of development. In sum, Bangladesh needs to jumpstart the culture of development, through democracy and good governance, which in other words means, unlearning its past mistakes. The reversal of the process of retardation, which even highly qualified people within and beyond Bangladesh fail to detect as they have been hypnotized by the spell of more than 7 per cent annual GDP growth, and \$45 billion annual export earnings which is, however, not substantial for a country with 170 million people. We need to understand the way Bangladesh came into being has something to do with its problematic leadership quality, and the evaporation of democratic values and culture. Firstly, the country came into being almost without any plan or preparation on the part of the would-be founding fathers; secondly, the country was a by-product of Pakistani intransigence and brutality rather than as a historical inevitability; and lastly, the emergence of Bangladesh signalled the ascendancy of the previously marginalized petty bourgeois or lower-middle class, upper peasantry and working-class triumvirate, which not only supplanted the traditional upper and middle classes—Bengal and non-Bengali—but also got rid of middle-class values, out of design and by default. Consequently, the new ruling and business elites soon amassed huge wealth through smuggling, plundering nationalized industries, business and financial organizations, and black marketing of essential commodities, including rice, and nouveau riche classes of people emerged across the country, who were neither temperamentally democratic or civil nor willing to respect any rules and regulations. As discussed in Chaps. 4–6,

muscle power, blatant nepotism and favouritism under Mujib and his successors since 1972 have replaced the rule of law, at least for the rich and powerful, and well-connected people in the country. After the first generation of petty-bourgeois and lumpen elements, who had already amassed huge wealth, property, political clout and power soon after the Liberation, the second generation of their like is now vying for similar opportunities which are few and far between and only attainable through more blatant corruption: bribery, smuggling, bank default and mega scams in the share market. Meanwhile, thanks to the GDP growth through readymade apparel export and expatriate Bangladeshi workers' remittance from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the successive governments have been telling everyone—within and beyond Bangladesh—about the miracle of growth and development that have taken place in the country. So much so that some ministers in a make-believe tone claim that soon Bangladesh is going to be another Switzerland and will be surpassing the US too in the realms of development, growth and prosperity. This chapter elucidates the culture that nurtures and justifies corruption, bad governance and tyranny. In sum, it is a narrative of (a) the positive correlation between culture and development/underdevelopment; and (b) the overpowering influence of myths, lies and propaganda in changing people's perceptions about a country like Bangladesh—at home and abroad—a tyranny with mass hunger and poverty has apparently become another Asian Tiger.

The Bangladesh Enigma: Culture Is the Solution

Bangladesh is one of the most difficult conundrums for experts to figure out why the deltaic eastern Bengal, which once generated around 12 per cent of the world GDP—in medieval and early modern periods, up to the mid-eighteenth century—has been one of the poorest and most backward places on earth since the British occupation of the province in 1757. The resolution of the enigma lies in our understanding of the history of the subjugation of the people by colonial rulers and their indigenous collaborators, and the process of mass expropriation and exploitation that ensued from the physical occupation of Bengal. Most importantly, the transformation of the collective culture of the people by British occupation—Thanks to British colonial exploitation, Bengalis, who had been once very prosperous and creative as the producers of the finest varieties of rice in abundance, and the

manufacturers of the finest cotton textile (muslin), silk and other precious export items became immiserated, landless and unemployed in less than fifty years of British occupation in 1757. It would be too insensitive and naïve to assume that despite the least expected, fast and almost total immiseration of Bengali Muslims (they had been the worst victims of British colonial rule in the province) there was little or no change in their collective psyche, popular and political culture, norms and behaviour. Bengali Muslims, in general, became crest-fallen, bitter, angry and almost totally alienated from the new rulers and their local agents of exploitation: *zamindars* (landlords), *bhadralok* (Hindu professionals), *mahajan* (moneylenders), police and bureaucrats. Their alienation from the state—which was much more intensive than their indifference to the Mughal rulers—was so deep-rooted in their psyche that the average Bangladeshi still does not have the sense of belonging to their country, which is expected of people in the developed countries in the East and West. In short, the culture of lack of mutual trust and respect, having no qualms with plundering national wealth, bribery and all forms of corrupt practices that one comes across in the present Bangladesh is legacies of two centuries of British rule. Bengali Muslims, who were the main victims of British rule, including the loss of political power, government jobs, mainly in the army and judiciary; expropriation through various legislations and exploitation through the *Zamindari* system and the usurious moneylending system. In short, xenophobia, Islamic revival and reforms, bitter anti-Hindu sentiment, class antagonism and mistrust of non-peasant others grew among Bengali Muslims. Meanwhile, due to the transfer of the capital from Murshidabad to Calcutta, there was massive de-urbanization. Many well-to-do and educated Muslims lost jobs or government patronage and moved to rural areas to swell the ranks of peasants. Many weavers also became unemployed and poor. So, the culture of conflict and mistrust permeated through society. Non-Muslims and government are still not trustworthy.

Ironically, the two sets of indigenous rulers following two rounds of Independence in 1947 and 1971—who more or less followed their British predecessors' ways of governance—did not bring the *hoi polloi* of Bangladesh closer to their ruling elites. Instead, the quasi-feudal relationship that the British created in Bengal through the *Zamindari* system in 1793, is still alive. On top of that, one witnesses the overpowering influence of peasant culture, which is all about factions, frictions and

patron-client relationships even in the parliament, government and private offices and business establishments. As mentioned above, peasants-in-business-suit are running the show at every level, in public and private spheres. In sum, the collective culture of Bangladesh represents colonial, semi-feudal and pre-capitalist/premodern traits of human behaviour and belief systems. Lies, deceptions, disloyalty and opportunism are the major traits of Bangladeshi culture. Again, the collective culture of Bangladesh is very similar to that of India, Pakistan and many other postcolonial countries across the world. Now, it is imperative that we first understand the collective culture of the people to understand the what-went-wrong syndrome of Bangladesh, about the state of underdevelopment of the country, as a whole.

Thus, Bangladesh society, having more in common with Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* (rural community) rather than with the *Gesellschaft* (urban society), is promoting the politics of faction-ridden, quasi-tribal, village or premodern peasant community. The *Gemeinschaft* culture is “pre-political,” or violent and fatalist at the same time. Villagers hardly expect much from their superordinates, let alone trust or respect them. Lack of trust and mutual respect is normal in the village community.¹⁴ As mentioned above, peasants in the general fight each other, especially their neighbours, over disputed properties, more so in deltaic Bangladesh.

A re-appraisal of peasant community and peasant culture leads us to the following characteristics and features associated with the peasant, who is factious—the village is his world and he is loyal to his faction chief most of the time—and is also fractious, litigious and vindictive. He does not trust others, especially outsiders; lacks commitment to ideas and people and is fatalist and escapist, cruel and violent, informal, superstitious, “pre-political”- wants immediate redress of immediate problems against immediate enemies/superordinates, often by violent means. He is narrow in outlook, considers agriculture the “best profession” and is by nature clannish, attached to the land, parochial/regional; and disrespectful to law and authority of non-peasant outsiders. Paradoxically, he hates outsiders but like them to be their leaders and aspires for himself and his children to the lifestyles of non-peasant well-to-do outsiders. He does not want to pay any tax and is not accustomed to law and order. He is disrespectful of women and promotes patriarchy. He is self-centred, does not know how to thank and congratulate others. He glorifies premodern ways of life, the past and

the hereafter and believes in millennial movements and a messiah/reliever. He is ethnocentric, jealous of others, arrogant and at the same time, suffers from an inferiority complex. He does not believe in and respect individualism, and is over-curious and intrusive by nature.

We know that “the peasant has never made history” and civilization has always been an urban concept. Peasants work hard but are not as productive as industrial workers. One may agree with Fukuyama that “modern wealth is based on human capital (knowledge and education), technology, innovation, organization, and a host of other factors related to the quality rather than the simple quantity of labour used to create it.”¹⁵ As Max Weber has suggested, hard work alone does not guarantee prosperity—“work ethic” is more important than work per se. And “work ethic” includes virtues like frugality, a rational approach to problem-solving and a preoccupation with here-and-now inclining people to conquer nature through innovations and labour. Social virtues like honesty, reliability, cooperativeness and a sense of duty to others are essential preconditions for growth and development. Peasants lack most of the above qualities. They are also lacking in “spontaneous sociability”—they are shy and introverted (so are the average Bangladeshis—one may find out how strangers normally do not socialize or talk with each other in parties, weddings and other social gatherings in Bangladesh). While “spontaneous sociability” leads to organizational innovation, the latter leads to growth and development. It is pertinent to understand that strong families but weak bonds of trust among unrelated people are one of the pre-conditions to underdevelopment.¹⁶

Unless modernism and urban culture replace premodern, “feudal” and “colonial” elements from the socio-political stage of Bangladesh, good governance, growth and prosperity will remain elusive for quite some time. Democracy and capitalism (just like socialism) simply cannot be grafted on a polity. We have examples of failed economies and democracies in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Post-Renaissance, Post-Reformation and Post-Industrialization concepts cannot be appreciated by predominantly agrarian and illiterate communities like those of Bangladesh and many other countries, regions and sub-regions in the Third World. Unless one performs social-engineering like the “pressure cooker” method adopted by the Meijis in Japan, or finds a suitable alternative to what has been going on in the country in the name of “parliamentary democracy” to establish good

governance and to promoting economic growth and prosperity like so many east Asian countries, there is no short-term remedy for the maladies of Bangladesh.

Now, as one believes development is mostly abstract, invisible and qualitative not quantitative by nature, one may cite some apparently prejudicial and some seemingly objective ones about common traits of Bengali character and culture by some British administrators to understand the cultural aspect of underdevelopment of Bangladesh society. However, British administrators and writers those who made observations about undignified common traits of Bengali culture never bothered to track down the causes of such behaviour. We may start with the grossly unkind assertion by Thomas Babington Macaulay about the nastiest possible nature of the Bengalis or people from the Lower Ganges area. British Historian and Whig politician Lord Macaulay, who was the First Law Member of the India's Governor General's Council during 1834–1838, was extremely prejudiced against Oriental culture and civilization. He divided the world into civilized nations and barbarism, and was possibly right in undermining the Orient in the realm of knowledge by insisting that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”¹⁷ In 1841, in his essay “Warren Hastings” he wrote about the deceptive and corrupt mind of the Bengalis in the following manner: “What horns are to the buffalo, what paw is to the tiger, what the sting is to the bee Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissues of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery, are the weapons, offensive and defensive, of the people of the Lower Ganges ... with all his softness, the Bengalee is by no means placable in his enmities or prone to pity.” He also believed the Bengalis also lack courage and physical strength, and historically had been “trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds.”¹⁸ What Macaulay wrote about the Bengalis he met in and around Calcutta, about their deceptive, cruel and vicious unforgiving nature, prone to lie and harm the weak but submissive to the powerful is possibly true about every colonized and defeated people across the world. So many non-Bengali Indians under British rule were possibly not that different from Macaulay's “people of the Lower Ganges.” Then again, collectively, South Asian traditions have negative correlation with development.

John Beams, another British civil servant, scholar and author, was an ultra-conservative imperialist who had some kind words for people in

Orissa, where he served before moving to Chittagong as the Divisional Commissioner in 1878, simply despised Bengali Muslims. He thought they were by nature “the most quarrelsome, litigious, vindictive race in India.” He called them: “hungry, vicious, and venomous.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, some of the eyewitness accounts by British colonial administrators of the corrupt and intriguing nature of the people in Bengal reflect the truth and the administrators’ desire to address the problem. Australian Lord Richard Gardiner Casey, who as the Governor of Bengal (1944–1946) was one of them. He wrote to Prime Minister Winston Churchill about the corrupt, intriguing and vile nature of the Bengalis. On 20 May 1944 he wrote the following confidential note to Churchill: “I’ve never been in a place before where bribery, corruption and intrigue are accepted as inevitable. There is no sense of public responsibility or civic sense amongst the Indians. I propose to institute an ‘Anti-Corruption’ drive here before long.”²⁰ Yet another British administrator and author Robert Carstairs gives account of endless rivalries and tensions between the rich and the poor, landlords and tenants in East Bengal, and writes: “harmony was the exception rather than the rule.”²¹

However, William Hunter, the famous nineteenth century British historian, statistician and civil servant was sympathetic to Bengali Muslims. He explained why they had been angry, disillusioned, ignorant, marginalized, poor, one of the most downtrodden people in British India, and most of whom only employable as servants and cleaners. He blamed the discriminatory British policy towards the Muslims in Bengal, in this regard. He writes in 1871: “A hundred and seventy years ago it was almost impossible for a well-born Musalman in Bengal to become poor; at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich.”²² Praising Bengali Muslims, he writes: “The truth is, when the country passed under our rule, the Musalmans were the superior race and superior not only in stoutness of heart and strength of arm but in the power of political organization and the science of practical government.”²³

Since this is a study of postcolonial Bangladesh during the first fifty years of its Liberation, what colonial administrators thought had been the main traits of Bengali culture helps us understand the what-went-wrong aspect of the problem of development in the country. William Hunter’s finger-pointing at the British colonial rulers’ discriminatory policy against Bengali Muslims help us understand why Bangladeshi Muslims lack mutual

trust and respect, and their alienation from the state, and suspicion of outsiders being the main traits of their culture.

Alien rule, as experienced by Bengalis for centuries under the Senas, various Turco-Mughal dynasties, the British and also to some extent under non-Bengali Pakistanis, have turned them xenophobic and compliant-cum-sycophantic to ruling elites at the same time. Aatur Rahman Khan (1905–1991)—a co-founder of the Awami League and Chief Minister of East Pakistan (1956–1958)—is among many Bengalis who have pointed out how shamelessly a Bengali can butter anyone rich, powerful and influential. He has cited examples of extreme flattery by bureaucrats and potential beneficiaries of his favour while he was the Chief Minister. While some would praise his administrative skill, others would extol his other “god-gifted” virtues. Two senior bureaucrats told glorified him in his presence as the best gift of God to the nation. Khan has also pointed out Bengalis lack collective leadership, and rarely cooperate with or respect their neighbours, colleagues and peers. They would rather work against each other’s interests, and speak badly behind their back. In sum, they love to kowtow powerful rulers, alien or local.²⁴ Then again, it is noteworthy that the same Aatur Rahman Khan, who once ridiculed sycophants and flatterers of people in power, paradoxically, became the Prime Minister of illegitimate military dictator General H.M. Ershad of Bangladesh, a few years before his death.

In retrospect, we find the following factors responsible for the retrogression of governance, civility and well-being of the people in Bangladesh:

- a. The absence of ethics or the acceptance of corruption
- b. The degeneration of the education system
- c. Opportunism of the elite
- d. Consequential failure of the welfare state

On the one hand, neither parents/elders nor priests/teachers/politicians hardly ever teach their children, juniors and followers any ethics by drawing a line between right and wrong, honesty and dishonesty, on the other, they all draw a bold line between “crime” and “sin,” implying that as

long as hard-core criminals believe in God, practice religious rituals, they have nothing to worry about any divine retribution following what clerics, teachers and elders believe; that is, the most heinous criminal is assured of the paradise provided he/she is a believer and performs certain religious rites! Since as Thrasymachus argued, ethics is all about what the stronger imposes on the weaker, Hobbes believed that what the good superordinate or ruler introduces certain codes of conduct for the subordinates to follow is ethics; and that life without a good ruler is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Ethics, in short, as Aristotle argued, is something which is not purely instinctive but something we learn from our elders. Ethics derives from training and instruction. The Chinese philosopher Mencius, who lived about the same time as Aristotle, also believed that human nature must be trained to be good, “as a willow tree must be carved to make it into a bowl!” He also believed that human nature is compassionate and with an innate sense of right and wrong, yet they do evil “because of adverse conditions have corrupted their nature.” Although Rousseau argued that our innate feelings of compassion make us ethical,²⁵ I believe ethics is integral to our culture, something we learn from others, and most importantly, it gets corrupted or even die under adverse conditions. The long tradition of alien rule, colonialism and consequential bad governance has programmed the Bengali psyche to be corrupt, greedy, selfish and unkind.

The politicization of crime and criminalization of politics in different names, democracy, freedom or Islam, have alienated many Bangladeshis from politics. According to late Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, a Bangladeshi economist: “While politics in the country is a business, the parliament is the marketplace, where members of the parliament call names at each other and spend 75 per cent of their time in praising their own leaders and party.”²⁶ Because of the above, one may ask: What are the people of the middle class doing? The Bengali Muslim middle classes had never been as well entrenched as their counterparts, elsewhere in the Subcontinent. The emergence of the Muslim middle classes in East Bengal took place after World War I. The sudden prosperity of the jute-growing cultivators during the World War I and the foundation of Dhaka University in 1921 had been instrumental in this regard. However, they were never totally detached from the rural hinterland, their *desher bari*, and culturally, they have been hardly that different from the peasantry. By the turn of the twentieth century, they mostly remained pre-capitalist with avowed loyalty towards the British Raj.

Some of them were daydreaming the attainment of the lost glory of the mythical Muslim world. This extra-territorial Muslim elite or *ashraf* until the Partition of 1947, lived in the past and “outside the country,” considering themselves as descendants of Arabs, Iranians, Turks or Afghans. In short, their ascendancy in the wake of the Great Divide of 1947 was through loyalty to the raj and anti-Hindu communalism.²⁷

After the Partition, many of them became rich by grabbing Hindu property and taking up newly available jobs after the mass emigration of Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* (professionals) from East Bengal to India. Similarly, as discussed in Chap. 7, soon after the Liberation, many Bangladeshi Muslims from the lower echelons of society grabbed *Bihari* (branded as anti-Bangladeshi, Pakistani collaborators) properties, businesses and industries. The bulk of the upper classes in the country also enriched themselves by robbing government property, usurping billions of taka in the name of bank loans, and by the ruthless expropriation of others. Consequently, the vacillating and opportunistic nature of both the old and new middle classes has totally delegitimized them to represent the so-called civil society. In short, the newly emerging elite, mainly emanating from the petty-bourgeois classes, bypassed the hitherto dominant Bengalis. They had two powerful weapons to dethrone and delegitimize the old elite. Firstly, by portraying themselves as “freedom fighters” (many of them crossed the border and stayed in India during the Liberation War) and secondly, by introducing Bengali as the official language not long after the emergence of Bangladesh. The “vernacular elite,” as Oliver Roy has used the expression,²⁸ successfully toppled the Western elite by staging a coup d’état in the name of Bengali nationalism. As discussed earlier, once they managed to install themselves to power, the new elite did not waste any time sending their children to English-medium schools and universities, at home and abroad. However, education in the English medium has been too expensive to afford for the bulk of the population. This is another reason why low-paid government servants resort to corruption! One with hindsight may surmise that the demand for introducing Bengali as the medium of instruction without any corresponding preparation was first, a gimmick to strengthen Bengali nationalism during Pakistani rule. Secondly, those who demanded this had been aware of their limitations or lack of proficiency in English. So, vernacularization, in a way, paved the way for upward mobility for the petty-bourgeois, peasant and lumpen classes immediately after the

Liberation. Then again, pragmatism (job opportunities) has induced them to send their children to English-medium institutions!

The problematic education system in the country also does not promote honesty and ethical behaviour. There are three mediums of instruction in the country: Bengali, English and Madrasa. While the lower classes send their children to relatively affordable Bengali medium schools and colleges, the upper classes—almost exclusively—send their children to expensive English-medium educational institutions, at home or abroad. While English-medium graduates are employable in lucrative jobs, most Bengali-medium graduates remain under-employable. Poor and ultra-conservative/religious Muslims send their children to madrasas, which produce semi-educated clerics, who are almost totally unemployable for jobs in the public and private sectors. Thanks to the philanthropy of local and foreign donors, mostly from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of private *madrasas* or Islamic seminaries in the country.

This study has tried to answer some pertinent questions, whether (a) “the Bangladesh Syndrome” is typical of the country under review; (b) the way the region has evolved from an agrarian hinterland to a nation state in a short span of time is responsible for its poverty and backwardness; (c) “the culture of poverty” of the people is mainly responsible for the malady; (d) the “peasant way” of doing things, as reflected in the political culture of patron-client relationship, factionalism, regionalism, lack of trust and mutual respect, the primitive urge for accumulation of wealth and power in the state of perpetual uncertainty (and scarcity of resources) and the “we-versus-they” mentality of the peasants is at the root of Bangladesh’s misery; and (e) the last but not least, the culture of fatalism and next-worldliness which glorifies death not life and poverty, not prosperity, typical of any premodern/pre-capitalist community has an important role in keeping Bangladesh where it is stagnating today. One believes that the eventual ascendancy of the petty-bourgeois to power in collaboration with the lumpen bourgeois and lumpen proletariat after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 is also responsible for the backwardness of the polity.

What is pertinent to our understanding that the so-called civil society, said to have the magic wand to right the wrongs, cannot be just created through an act of the parliament or be transplanted on the polity. Civil societies thrive in countries with durable social institutions shaped by those

customs, norms, habits and ethics of a people who promote the culture of trust and cooperation. Voluntary associations, educational institutions, media, charities, religious institutions such as churches and mosques, businesses and among others, cultural organizations, represent civil societies to transmit the values to the broader society. Only law and economic rationality are not enough for growth and prosperity. Growth and prosperity remain elusive without reciprocity, trust and moral obligations towards each other. These values, again, are habit-based intrinsic qualities of those people who nourish certain values that are not necessarily “rational.” As Max Weber has pointed out, trust is not derived from rational calculation rather from religious habits. The apparently ritualistic Bangladeshis are at most “religious,” not “pious” in the true sense of the expression. It may sound paradoxical, but there is logic in the Weberian explanations of the Protestant ethic and its role in the promotion of economic growth. According to Max Weber, the early puritans in Europe sought God by denouncing material goods and developed certain virtues like honesty and thrift that ultimately generated wealth, power and capital. Early Muslims as well, accumulated wealth and power by renouncing earthly possessions and glorified God and eventually accumulated knowledge, wealth and power. Weber took Marx to task for assuming that economic forces created religion rather than culture or religion produced economic forces and behaviour.

Neo-classical economists, Milton Friedman and George Stigler, among others, have stressed the self-interest of the rational man, or Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” as the steering force behind economic growth. Their undermining customs, traditions and habits of the given society as a factor of growth, is enigmatic. However, Adam Smith rightly understood the importance of customs, morals and habits in generating growth and development. On the other hand, Chalmers Johnson, James Fallows, Alice Amsden and others have argued that economic growth in East Asian countries has taken place not by blind compliance with the rules of the free market economy but by their violation of those rules, which undermine the authority of the government. In East and Southeast Asia, prosperity came through direct government intervention. In fact, what Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia are today, would not have been possible without the Meiji Restoration, Park Chung-hee, Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamed. Although another Meiji Restoration, Park Chung-hee, Lee Kuan

Yew or Mahathir Mohamed could possibly reverse the degeneration process in the country, every country has its own unique history of progress and regress, which varies widely depending on factors like demography, history, geography and political culture. Then again, historically, backward nations have often learnt things from the developed ones.

The rule of law along with honest and accountable leadership, especially bureaucrats, led to their sustained growth. By maintaining the balance between reward and punishment, which is fundamental to Islam, Christianity and Confucianism, these leaders performed “miracles.” Wealthier nations like Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Burma, Laos and Cambodia in the same region, have failed to embrace the right culture under the right leadership. In short, tracking the main causes of the retardation process is a positive step towards solving the problem. Nevertheless, it is the most difficult job to rectify them. Since the problem did not crop up in a year or two, there is no quick solution. Bangladesh will have to go through this trial-and-error transition before the people can get rid of dynastic or guided democracy. We cannot agree more with Shahid Javed Burki (a retired World Bank Vice President and former Finance Minister of Pakistan) that “dynastic democracy” in South Asia “has impeded the development and professionalizing of political parties, which is a necessary condition for the creation of advanced political orders. Political dynasties flourished in those cultures that put individual interests above that of the society.”²⁹ In sum, democracy is not an end but a means towards progress and development. As Fareed Zakaria has argued that “racists and fascists” might get elected in “illiberal” democracies; and “that is the dilemma.” We may agree with him that society must ensure liberal values first before it becomes democratic; illiberal societies cannot nurture liberal democracy.³⁰ Liberal democracies ensure the rule of law, a sine qua non of development. Now, is Bangladesh a classic example of Kornhauser’s “mass society”?

Is Bangladesh a Kornhauser’s “Mass Society!”

What late sociologist William Kornhauser wrote in his seminal work on mass society in the late 1950s is still very relevant to Bangladesh society. He argues, mass societies run oligarchies controlling “the conditions of life of the many” who have no say in running of the state machinery.³¹

Encyclopaedia Britannica's definition of mass society is also very useful to understand the Post-Liberation Bangladesh, where people are more or less "homogenized but also disaggregated because it is composed of atomized individuals."³² Paradoxically, masses do not run mass societies; they are not integrated into the state and remain peripheral. Nevertheless, most totalitarian uprisings, including the Bolshevik, Fascist and Nazi takeovers in Europe were "mass uprisings" in name only. As communist/socialist revolutions have so far installed party and military elites to power, Nazism was mostly about protecting the big non-Jewish business in Germany, the Bangladesh Revolution was no exception in this regard. Kornhauser's mass society neither is synonymous with the working class nor is by design a promoter of totalitarian states, but mass societies are somehow inherently incapable of promoting democracy, and thus "vulnerable to capture by totalitarian elites." The atomized premodern society "invites the totalitarian movement [which appears to be democratic, libertarian, and pro-people], which provides both pseudo-authority in the form of the charismatic leaders and pseudo-community in the form of the totalitarian party."³³ One may read Hitler and the Nazi Party, Mao and the Communist Party, Qaddafi and his Green Book, Mugabe and the ZANU Party, or Mujib and the Awami League as the pseudo-charismatic leaders and parties, respectively, for understanding how mass societies evolve out of false promises and false hope, and in the name of pseudo-democracy, pseudo-Liberation and pseudo-revolution.

Actually, mass societies change and destroy old orders without creating any better alternatives. Interestingly, post-revolutionary/Post-Liberation elites remain divided on having mass societies. French aristocratic elites who abhorred the post-revolutionary anarchy and the Reign of Terror welcomed Napoleon as the alternative for order.³⁴ In Bangladesh, we witnessed old elites—many of whom had a soft corner for Pakistan even during the Liberation War—supporting the coup leaders who killed Mujib and toppled his one-party dictatorship in 1975. We also witnessed that the changes of guards in Bangladesh after 1975 did not restore democracy and equal opportunities either. Unless true democracy and libertarian philosophy of governance are well entrenched, mass societies go on producing one monster after another. Ironically, without adhering to the philosophy or culture of democracy and justice, societies remain vulnerable to the mass society syndrome, which establishes the "sovereignty of the

unqualified.” At the very beginning, mass opinion dominates the government, which symbolizes the “incompetence of the many.” The government loves to use popular but hollow rhetoric, promising democracy, freedom, socialism and whatever the masses want to hear.³⁵ This is what we witnessed for few months following the ascendancy of Mujib as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, up to 1974. However, his switching over to a one-party dictatorship in early 1975 did not resonate well with the masses. No wonder, they were in a state of euphoria at the killing of Mujib and the overthrow of the regime. Thus, following the August 1975 coup that overthrew Mujib, disorganized masses wanted to dictate terms to the government. And, we know “crowds are only powerful for destruction” and possibly, only “a small intellectual aristocracy” can protect civilizations, as Le Bon has suggested.³⁶ It is very pertinent to understand the inherent contradictions in a mass society. Mass societies start functioning with “accessible elites,” whom they consider as their “own people,” but totalitarian societies require “inaccessible” elites and “available” non-elites. Although initially, the unruly masses call the shots, dominate almost every sphere of society and government machinery, but eventually as the tables turn, “the threat posed by mass society is less how elites may be protected from the masses and more how non-elites may be shielded from domination by elites.” In mass societies, “there is *high availability of a population for mobilization by elites*” [italics in original].³⁷ This is what exactly happened in Bangladesh during and in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Mujib regime. The faction-ridden fractured peasant community, which cannot live without non-peasant patrons, eventually surrendered to their patrons. And, the latter is running the show in the name of ideologies their clients hear to listen most.

Then again, there are multiple ideologies and symbols of justice and order for the people, Mujib’s Bengali nationalism, Zia’s Bangladeshi nationalism and various brands of Islam! So far, the masses have hovered between the first two ideologies—which are nothing but red herrings, absolutely hollow and meaningless—while the proponents of political Islam have remained divided, and some bear the stigma of collaborating with the Pakistan Occupation Army in 1971. The tragedy of all mass society is that both aristocratic and democratic elites dislike democracy, egalitarianism and individual freedom; and they draw a synonymy between “popular democracy” and “popular dictatorship.” The upshot being mass societies’

“vulnerability to totalitarianism, rather than traditional forms of dictatorship,” as Kornhauser argues, democracy and the rule of law remain elusive. He also attributes the rise of mass societies to rapid rural to urban migration; sudden rise in poverty or prosperity among sections of the population, and growing unemployment. The overall socio-political and economic crises also draw large numbers of unemployed youths in the 18- to 40-year-old age group, unattached intellectuals, anarchists, fascists and even religious extremists to millennial revolutionary movements or Liberation Wars. And, they all provide the building blocks of mass societies, while the middle class and middle-class values, and working-class people remain marginalized, isolated and irrelevant.³⁸

Understanding mass societies which apparently give the impression that a large number of masses have joined the mainstream of politics (in fact, the only stream, because mass societies eventually lead to one-party totalitarianism) are essential for an understanding of society and politics in Bangladesh. As Kornhauser has argued, “mass politics in democratic society ... is anti-democratic ... the extreme case of mass politics is the totalitarian movement.” He also believes that although “elite” is a pejorative in the discourse of democracy, elites nevertheless ensure the existence of pluralism, while the so-called mass politics lead to the bureaucratization of the polity to the detriment of the “plurality of group interests and organizations.” Eventually, “the nihilism of masses tends to be a greater threat to liberal democracy than the antagonism between classes.”³⁹

Mass society is not something that ever disappears completely in poor and backward countries. Even post-World War I Germany and Italy, which were substantially industrialized and developed, were not immune to the rise of mass society. Initially, the masses had access and influence on Hitler and Mussolini. However, the would-be-dictators’ clever manipulations overpowered the delusional masses who had earlier thought of them as their own people. In the case of Bangladesh, masses made Mujib and called him “Mujib Bhai” (“Brother Mujib”) up to late February 1969. Even after they decided to call him “Bangabandhu” (“Friend of Bengal”), they had unlimited access to him and were virtually leading Mujib to say and do things, which he was unwilling to say or do up to 25 March 1971, until the Pakistani military crackdown. In March 1969, Bengali masses coined the slogan, *Jai Bangla* (Victory to Bengal), which later became the battle cry, and later Mujib had to raise this slogan frequently despite his earlier strong

reservations about it. The masses designed a new flag of Bangladesh, and forced Mujib to raise it on 2 March 1971, the day after Pakistani military ruler Yahya Khan had declared to prorogue the National Assembly session for some time. Last but not least, despite Mujib's strong reservations against even informally declaring the independence of Bangladesh as his ultimate motive, he had to mention this in his now-famous 7 March (1971) speech at a public rally in Dhaka. So, it is evident from the events that led to the separation of East Pakistan from Pakistan, as independent Bangladesh, that masses went ahead of Sheikh Mujib and were virtually telling Islamabad what they wanted through Mujib, who was less of a leader and more of a spokesman of the Bengali masses in East Bengal. Once Mujib and his party were well entrenched after the Liberation, it was altogether a different situation. The masses were fast losing their access to Mujib, and they lost it completely once he declared Bangladesh a one-party dictatorship on 25 January 1975. It is noteworthy that the sequence of events from the rise of a mass society from early 1969 to its hibernation (not demise) in January 1975—including mass proclivity to anarchy, cruelty, defiance of law and authorities, and terrorism in Bangladesh—validates the classical definitions and theories about mass society. Peasants and rural and urban poor have been the main components of mass society in Bangladesh. We need a broad understanding of mass and peasant culture to study the problem of underdevelopment in the country.

Postcolonial and Post-Liberation leaders in what is Bangladesh today directly or indirectly created extravagant expectations among the ordinary people before and after the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh. While Pakistan promised a never-ending period of “Eternal Eid.”⁴⁰ or extreme joy and happiness to the East Bengali Muslim masses—around 80 per cent of the population during the Partition—to the overwhelming majority of people in East Pakistan, Bangladesh meant the real land of prosperity and happiness, their *Sonar Bangla* or Golden Bengal. Although Pakistan was not a by-product of any revolutionary war of independence, nevertheless, the wild promises by Muslim League leaders who championed the Partition created some sort of mass society in East Bengal, which is all about the creation of a society where its members remain delusional, happy and identify themselves with their leaders as one of them, albeit for a short while only. This happens to all mass societies who evolve in the wake of Liberation under leaders who not-long-after the Liberation or revolution

abruptly distance themselves from the masses. However, they never stop identifying themselves as the masses' "own people," in love with them. Kim Il Sung, Mugabe, Idi Amin, Pol Pot and Sheikh Mujib—among others—were leaders of failed revolutions. Leaders in mass societies demonize some people within and some entities outside the national boundary as the enemies of their country, their freedom and prosperity.

Is It the “Culture of Poverty” or “Poverty of Culture”?

Now, let us look at some other exponents of culture and development to understand if the “culture of poverty” or the “poverty of culture” makes or unmakes civilizations, with special reference to Bangladesh. The discourse on Oscar Lewis’s “culture of poverty,” and a slight digression from it towards David Landes’s emphatic argument that “Culture makes almost all the differences” help us reconstruct some substantial argument that culture is the sole determinant of development or underdevelopment. And, Bangladesh is no exception in this regard. It is going up or down solely depends on the collective cultural traits of the Bangladeshis in the realms of their private and public affairs. Although geography to some extent, determines if a country becomes developed or underdeveloped, it is culture, not race of the people concerned is the determining factor in this regard. “Culture matters,” as Landes argues, is the lynchpin of this study. Poverty and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin. They owe their existence to multiple factors, such as history, geography and, most importantly, the culture of the people concerned. Thanks to technological advancement in every field, especially agriculture and communication, since the 1980s, there has been a substantial alleviation of hunger and poverty across the world. After the great famines of Bangladesh in 1974, and Ethiopia a decade after, North Korea was possibly the only country to have gone through a massive famine in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, despite widening the gap between the rich and the poor across the globe, the Globalization process had lowered the intensity of absolute poverty and hunger everywhere. Ever since the 1990s, we are being told by economists, philanthropists and politicians that the world will be free from poverty sometime by the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Jeffrey Sachs has

put it diplomatically about the so-called end of poverty: “Our generation can *choose to end* [emphasis added] that extreme poverty by the year 2025.”⁴¹ Muhammad Yunus has been very emphatic about “sending poverty to museums” by the year 2030, at least in Bangladesh: “one day our grandchildren will go to museums to see what poverty was like” he quips all the time.⁴² So far so good! However, as mentioned above, one UN report reveals in July 2019 that 24.2 million people or one in six Bangladeshis were underfed. Thus, “sending poverty to museums” in regard to Bangladesh in 2030 or anytime soon will remain an unfulfilled dream.

This study signals a departure from the traditional narratives of economists and development practitioners who impute poverty and underdevelopment mainly to wrong policies in the public and private sectors. Here historical data are being sifted through the sieve of cultural anthropology, development studies, economics, ethnography, politics and sociology. We agree with anthropologist Clarence Maloney that “we cannot understand what is really happening in Bangladesh without examining the human behaviour that determines the economic results.”⁴³ He believes while a foreigner to a cultural system “can often grasp what is going on differently” in a foreign country “than an insider to the system”; and that “at the end it is up to the insiders to correct and elaborate on these observations.”⁴⁴ As a historian and cultural anthropologist, the present writer—who is native to Bangladesh and is living abroad for the last four decades—has the advantage of observing and appraising the collective human behaviour of the people in Bangladesh, in historical and contemporary perspectives, both as an insider and as a “foreigner.” He also agrees with historian and economist David Landes that “culture makes almost all the differences” in the realms of economic development and underdevelopment.⁴⁵ He also thinks “because culture and economic performance are linked, changes in one will work back on the other.”⁴⁶ As Samuel Huntington argues, in early 1960s while Ghana and South Korea had similar economies with comparable per capita GNP, similar divisions of their economy among primary products, manufacturing and services, and both were overwhelmingly primary product exporters, thirty years later South Korea became an industrial giant and Ghana, having an economy about one-fifteenth that of South Korea, more or less remained where it had been in the 1960s. He attributes the extraordinary differences between the two countries’ levels of development to South Koreans’ adherence to thrift,

investment, hard work, education, organization and discipline. “Ghanaians had different values. In short, cultures count,” he concludes.⁴⁷

However, two of the world’s leading experts on development, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, on the other hand argue no single factor, such as culture, climate or geography determines why some nations succeed and some fail: “None of these factors is either definitive or destiny. Otherwise, how to explain why Botswana has become one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, while other African nations, such as Zimbabwe, the Congo, and Sierra Leone, are mired in poverty and violence?”⁴⁸ Apparently sounds good! However, it is flawed. Their argument that it is man-made political and economic institutions that underline economic success (or the lack of it), as if man-made political and economic institutions are not integral to culture! However, this study argues our religion, music, literature, art, architecture, norms, behaviour, laws and regulations, taboos, superstitions and definitely politics reflect our culture. Surprisingly, all the famous scholars who have endorsed this volume by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, including Nial Ferguson, Francis Fukuyama, Simon Johnson, Ian Morris and Nobel laureate economists Michael Spencer and Robert Solow have agreed with them that culture does not matter in the rise and fall of nations. They all have unwittingly excluded politics and planning from the domain of culture.

As culture plays the decisive role in the development or underdevelopment of nations, as some scholars argue, so does geography! Harsh climates, extreme heat and humidity, tropical diseases that often turn epidemical, and natural disasters play decisive roles in retarding human progress and growth. Riverine countries with dense forests, hot and humid climate, such as Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea, limit mobility of people, forcing them to remain isolated from each other. Isolated people remain introvert and stagnant; incapable of learning new technology for growth and development. Landes cites John Kenneth Galbraith who found no developed countries in a belt of a couple of thousand miles in width encircling the earth at the equator. “Everywhere the standard of living is low and the span of human life is short,” Galbraith argues. Landes also cites Paul Streeten, who finds most underdeveloped countries in the tropics.⁴⁹ Given the hypothesis that geography is as important as culture in determining a country’s level of development, we need answers to the following questions: Are developed tropical countries like Singapore, Hong

Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan and Botswana exceptions to the rule? We know as people in developed tropical countries used modern technology and established the rule of law for development. Here, the people's willingness to be innovative to improve their socio-economic conditions is integral to their culture. We also know some people have always been opposed to adopting innovative ideas and technology. One may mention cultural inhibitions about family planning and vaccination of children (against polio, for example) in some countries in this regard. Thus, backwardness and underdevelopment are also attributable to certain cultural inhibitions to adopt modern technology. We may cite the example of the Medieval Ottoman rulers' refusal to introduce the printing press and the clock as contributing factors behind the retardation and the eventual disintegration of the Empire. And, we know time management leads to urbanization, rational, diligent, orderly, productive society.⁵⁰ We have reasons to agree with Lawrence Harrison that "underdevelopment is a state of mind," and that for many nations, culture had been a primary obstacle to development. He also thinks people's willingness to learn from disasters, dictatorship in Germany, Japan and Argentina, for example, plays a positive role in regard to development.⁵¹

Scholars have diverse opinions on culture and development, and their contradictory narratives are problematic. While Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber explain the rise of capitalism essentially a cultural phenomenon, Jeffrey Sachs argues that culture is an "insignificant factor" by comparison with geography and climate.⁵² While David Landes is a strong proponent of "culture-makes-all-the-difference-theory," sceptics insist appropriate economic policy produces same results irrespective of culture. Alan Greenspan, a former US Federal Reserve Board Chairman, who had previously assumed that humans are "natural capitalists" changed his mind after the collapse of communism in Europe. The post-communist Russian economic disaster in the 1990s convinced him that it was "not nature at all, but culture" behind the disaster.⁵³ Landes has attributed post-communist Russia's hiccup to seventy-five years of anti-market, anti-profit policy of the Soviet system that nurtured anti-entrepreneurial attitudes, which did not die off soon after the collapse of communism.⁵⁴ He cites a Russian joke about peasant apathy to enterprise and contempt for competition and prosperity of others in this regard: "Ivan is jealous of Boris because Boris has a goat. A fairy comes along and offers Ivan a single wish.

What does he wish for? That Boris's goat should drop dead."⁵⁵ Interestingly, the above joke could well be an appropriate one from Bangladesh! We may cite the prevalent poverty and backwardness among African Americans as an example of how five centuries of discrimination is responsible for the skill-gap, competence-gap, the wage-gap of Afro-Americans from the White settlers in America. Not race but slavery was mainly responsible for this.⁵⁶ Harrison is right, most economists are uncomfortable with culture as the main determinant of human progress or retardation, as culture has definitional problem and difficult to quantify.⁵⁷ Many scholars simply do not agree that some cultures are development-resistant. We may agree with Victor Purcell in regard to the positive correlation of culture and development. He cites examples from Southeast Asia: "A Chinese works till midnight, and a Malay sleep till midday."⁵⁸ Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia and North America, the Japanese minorities in Brazil and the US, and the Jews wherever they migrated have been more hardworking and enterprising than others. One wonders why most predecessors of the same hardworking Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere had been poor, and China remained underdeveloped, poor and subjugated by Britain and Japan for a substantial time! We believe military backwardness or the lack of modern armament was the main factor here. Civil wars, famines, pestilence, foreign invasions are important factors to neutralize the development-oriented culture of nations. As Ibn Khaldun has put it, *asabiyyah* or social solidarity, group consciousness and the sense of shared purpose is at the roots of success for any community or state. Weak *asabiyyah* leads to complacency, arrogance and the neglect of education, military organization and civil administration. Greeks, Egyptians, Arabs, Persians and Indians, among others, went through this phase of history. By the same token, Bangladesh, which was once the richest country in the world during late medieval period is now one of the poorest!

Then again, we cannot ignore the role people's collective memory play to incentivize or disincentivize them to take part in national politics. People whose ancestors in different generations narrated stories about ruthless extractions by ruling elites, have already been programmed to mistrust the state and ruling elites. Those, whose ancestors' collective memories had been about inclusive socio-political and economic institutions, are willing to act positively to the state and state machinery. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have developed a hypothesis, rejecting the assumption that

political leaders' ignorance is the main impediment to growth and development. They argue through history that charismatic leaders alone cannot engineer prosperity, nor can successful political revolutions, such as the French, Bolshevik or Egyptian guarantee peace, progress and the freedom from hunger and poverty. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 led to the Industrial Revolution as its greatest contribution to England was the creation of pluralism, not the exclusive overlordship of an oligarchy. Pluralism enshrined inclusive institutions, which incentivized the ordinary Englishmen and women to be hardworking as they developed a sense of belonging to their country. This would not have happened under oligarchs jealously guarding their exclusive political and economic institutions. The Meiji Restoration in Japan ran parallel to the Glorious Revolution.⁵⁹ In other words, "inclusive political and economic institutions" means people's right to own private agrarian holdings. We simply cannot understand why pre-colonial Bengalis, and Indians as a whole, did not bother much to prevent the ascendancy of the British as their new rulers, without understanding the most important factor behind their collective indifference. That was, there was NO private ownership of agrarian land in pre-colonial India. Hence their alienation-from-the-state-induced apathy to fight for the state, which again had been extremely extractive. Acemoglu and Robinson cite the example of Peru, which today is quite poor and backward in the Western hemisphere, but 500 years back under the Inca Empire was richer and more technologically sophisticated than the smaller polities around. However, centralized rule and exclusive political and economic institutions under the very extractive Inca Empire, turned Peru into a soft target to the Spanish conquistadors. On the other hand, as they argue, the Tokugawa Japan with its inclusive institutions and less extractive rule successfully resisted Commodore Perry's ships when they arrived in Edo Bay.⁶⁰ Thus, common ethnicity, language or religious belief is not the common factor behind the development or underdevelopment of countries. The two Koreas—one prosperous, and another poor—are glaring examples in support of the above assertion. A Lee Kuan Yew or Park Chung-hee could perform miracles, but their main secrets were their ability to build socio-political and economic institutions to incentivize people at the different levels of society so that they not only welcomed the small number of honest and efficient elites around Lee and Park, but they also took

initiatives in the development process. In sum, people without any stakes in the state-enterprise remain passive, poor and backward.

The lack of trust for the law-enforcing agencies and the government itself is inherent in the popular culture of the people. Their folk traditions have taught the peasants that governments—whether those of the Mughals, nawabs, British, Pakistanis or Bangladeshis—have always been alien and extortionist. One is not sure if the peasants' collective memory reminds them that the pre-colonial Mughals and nawabs used to collect at least 50 per cent of the yield as the land tax (*kharaj*) along with numerous *abwab* (illegal exactions) and that *zamindars* during the colonial period were exacting and oppressive as the postcolonial government officials and landlords have never been that benign to them either. They have also learnt from their collective memory that the police are exacting, the magistrate is corrupt and other non-peasant outsiders are not trustworthy at all. Consequently, almost an unbridgeable gulf has been created between the peasant and the government or *sarkar*, in his parlance. So, “do not expect anything from the *sarkar* and do not hesitate to destroy the *sarkar*'s property, as it does not belong to you,” so goes the conventional wisdom of the people.

This culture of alienation has justified both extortion and bribery. Government officials, members of parliament and ministers are expected to make money as they invest substantial amount of money to get these positions. It is not uncommon that candidates bribe high ups in the police, customs or taxation departments to get the aspired positions which guarantee them good return in the form of bribe and other illegal gratifications. The average Bangladeshi considers those who do not make money by abusing power as *boka* or idiots, not as honest and normal people. Honesty is no longer considered the “best policy” among the *hoi polloi*. Consequently, one comes across the Bengali saying: “*Churi bidya baro bidya jadi na paro dhara*” (stealing is a great art or technique unless you are caught). This attitude is reflective of the people's sense of deprivation and alienation from the polity. “*Sarkari maal, dariya mey daal*” (throw away government property into the river), so goes the folk adage throughout the Subcontinent.

This alienation from the government has led them to the destruction and vandalization of public property and to the mentality of not paying anything to the government. One may cite the example of an East Bengali peasant

who in the 1920s defined *swaraj* or self-rule in the following manner: “The Swaraj stands for a golden age when prices should fall, taxation should cease, and when the state should refrain from interfering with the good pleasure of each man.”⁶¹ This may reflect the peasants’ “hidden transcript,” to paraphrase James Scott, indicative of their alienation from and anger with the state machinery; nevertheless, this is also reflected in the *nouveau riches*’ reluctance to pay income tax, customs duty, electricity and telephone bills in Bangladesh. The newly entrenched elite does not want to pay anything to anybody. They even do not want to repay their bank loans. In general, the newly emerging Bengali Muslim elite are not interested in doing any philanthropic activities unless they get some advantage out of such “acts of charity.” The peasants’ low expectations from the government (as they have learnt through history that the governments only take, do not pay) are well reflected in the following writing on a faculty bus of Dhaka University: “A Gift from Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.” As if the bus was a personal donation from the Prime Minister!

The peasants’ clannish mentality and loyalty to their immediate patrons and clan members, a by-product of their “we-versus-they” mentality, is evident from their parochial and nepotistic behaviour. They justify crimes committed by a fellow villager outside their own village and his getting indulgence and support from his own clan members and patrons only as natural. The village community traditionally protects many robbers and anti-social elements, which do not harm their “own” people. Consequently, one often hears on the streets of Dhaka or elsewhere people bragging about what they can do—kill someone, kidnap someone, destroy someone’s property with impunity—as they know some influential politician, government servant or gangster or they come from the same clan, village or belong to the same political party/faction.

As we know, lack of group consciousness or sense of belonging to any entity larger than their “home district” or the territory their patrons control—local politicians irrespective of their party affiliations—among the bulk Bangladeshis is at the roots of the state of overall underdevelopment of their country. Contrary to the bulk of the Japanese people, who think they are superior to others,⁶² Bangladeshis have very low self-esteem and group solidarity. They neither like each other nor respect and trust each other. And, as Fukuyama has elaborated, mutual trust and respect provide the foundation blocks of development. The contrast between the Japanese and

the Bangladeshis becomes more glaring in the light of the following observations by Landes: “Japanese are self-disciplined people with a sense of national identity ... instil discipline, obedience, punctuality, and worshipful respect for the emperor ... the easiest way to practice one’s patriotism [is to] discipline oneself in daily life, help keep good order in one’s family, and fully discharge one’s responsibility on the job.”⁶³ We may agree with Ronald Inglehart, “Development is linked with a syndrome of predictable changes away from absolute social norms, toward increasingly rational, tolerant, trusting, and postmodern values,” because we know Bangladesh is the least predictable country, where the bulk of the people are neither predictable, rational, tolerant, nor trusting.⁶⁴ And, we know democracy, which is synonymous with development today, develops only under developed civil societies, and social trust is the key to democracy. Social trust involves rationality, mutual respect, tolerance. Most importantly, while social conformity kills democracy, individualism nurtures democratic values. Since social conformity or the dogmatic belief systems of peasant communities is all about believing in and practising what elders and priests tell the people to do without any question, it restricts free thinking out of the box. Then again, the adherents of various faiths and followers of various political parties adhere to their own versions of “truth,” where there is no room for accommodating any diverse opinion, rational arguments and the truth.

In the absence of economic and political inclusion and an end to the collective extraction of resources, opportunities and power from the masses by the ruling elites, Bangladesh will remain an LDC or a middle-income country with a very large gap between the ruling/business elites and the poor. According to Acemoglu and Robinson, culture does not positively correlate with prosperity, poverty, and bad or good governance, as they have done by highlighting the differences between North and South Korea’s different societal systems, living standards, and levels of freedom and prosperity. There seems to be no difference in the culture and traditions of Koreans in the North or South. In addition to this, they attribute the rapid economic development of South Korea to Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee’s dynamic policies of developing inclusive economic institutions, which led to the rapid evolution of the economy and then to democratic political institutions (unlike North Korea). Furthermore, they attribute West Europe’s remarkable economic and political freedom in the post-plague era (late

sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) to weak and dying feudal institutions, unlike East Europe.⁶⁵ Prior to leaping forward, Rhee and Chung-Hee substantially transformed the collective political culture of South Koreans by discarding the culture of subservience and poverty nurtured by their feudal lords and Japanese colonizers. Dynamic leadership can jumpstart the engine of inclusive economic and political institutions. The Meiji Restoration in Japan and the ascendancy of Lee Kuan Yew's party in Singapore are other examples. However, one cannot expect the emergence of dedicated, honest and capable leaders in the country, anytime soon. By overpowering the lumpen classes at the helm of statecraft, Bangladesh can reverse the stagnation process through dynamic leaders striving for inclusive economic and political institutions.

Concluding Observations

As a result of the theoretical framework above, one can make the following conclusions:

Getting rid of elitism is one thing, and promoting the masses and their culture is another. It is not possible for Bangladesh to be ruled by “peasants in a business suit” for much longer. This study is very pertinent to Le Bon's glorification of a small number of intellectual aristocrats as the creators and directors of civilization and rejection of the masses as powerful agents of destruction. Policymakers in Bangladesh must pay attention to what Le Bon thought about intellectual elites and unruly crowds. It is imperative that they understand that civilization has always been urban, which has refined the upward mobility of the people by discarding rural/peasant rusticity.

- a. Policymakers must address the problem of the entrenched mass society in Bangladesh. As Kornhauser argued against the rise of mass society and politics, it is still relevant today: “Mass politics occurs when large numbers of people engage in political activity outside of the procedures and rules instituted by a society to govern political action. Mass politics in a democratic society, therefore, is anti-democratic, since it contravenes the constitutional order.”⁶⁶
- b. Nevertheless, this process can be reversed by a small number of selfless intellectual elites in Bangladesh who can weed out the roots of mass society and plant the seeds of liberal democracy. It is imperative

to warn the population that the current mass politics in the country could lead to totalitarianism.

c.

Not only does the police make arbitrary arrests and enforce disappearances of political dissidents, but it also helps the ruling Awami League party manipulate elections. In 2014, the deep state became so entrenched that it is unclear who is in charge, Sheikh Hasina or the bureaucrat-police-military network! Bangladeshi policymakers need to tackle the issue of bureaucratization in the public sector. Although Max Weber believes bureaucratization, not class struggle, is the driving force of our modern world, it is time to emphasize the threat bureaucracy poses to social pluralism and liberal democracy.⁶⁷ Bangladeshis, like most postcolonial societies in the Third World, in general, consider government employees or bureaucrats to be their overlords because of the colonial legacy. In most cases, elected representatives—local and national—are less educated (some are practically illiterate) than the top echelons of the bureaucracy, allowing the latter to have more power.

d.

Despite Bangladesh's corrupt, unaccountable and powerful bureaucracy—which is integral to mass society, a precursor to totalitarianism—the poor, backward and overpopulated country faces no easy way out of mass politics.” Not only is peasant culture premodern—and incompatible with liberal democracy, secularism and the concept of human rights and dignity—it also perpetuates elite hegemony, intolerance and everything that could divide and fracture society. Together, mass and peasant cultures are lethal. The development practitioners and policy makers in Bangladesh (and those who have interests in the development of the country) should pay attention to the dynamics of mass-peasant culture and their likely disastrous impact on the country. Lack of trust and respect between pre-political and pre-capitalist peasants/lumpen elements has further plagued Bangladesh, making it one of the least governable, corrupt and inefficient states. A capitalist and inclusive order must replace the pre-capitalist order of the country run by multiple lumpen classes.

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10. Conclusions

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*When you see that men get richer by graft and by pull than by work,
and your laws don't protect you against them, but protect them
against you—When you see corruption being rewarded and honesty
becoming a self-sacrifice—You may know that your society is
doomed.*

—Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, Random House, New York 1957, p.
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*Yesterday is not ours to recover, but tomorrow is ours to win or
lose.*

—Lyndon B. Johnson,

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Keywords Mujib – Zia – Ershad – Khaleda – Hasina – Six Points –
Lumpen proletariat – “Culture matters” – Biharis – BDR massacre – State
religion – Hefazat-e-Islam – LDC

As Bernard Lewis writes, “When people realize that things are going wrong, there are two questions they ask. One is, ‘What did we do wrong?’ and the other is ‘Who did this to us?’ The latter leads to conspiracy theories and paranoia. The first question leads to another line of thinking: ‘How do we put it right?’”¹ While Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century, pondered, “How do we put it right?” Bangladeshis are likely to blame others for whatever ails their country since the Liberation. They need to look inward to find out what went wrong with themselves, rather than only blaming the ubiquitous “others” for all their misery. The study has

elaborated on what went wrong with the country before and after its Liberation. After the Liberation, new classes of people emerged from the lower-middle and lumpen classes to become political leaders, businessmen, industrialists, administrators, judges, professionals, educators and law-enforcers. Comparatively speaking, these classes in Bangladesh today have fared worse than their counterparts between 1947 and 1971. Petty-bourgeois and lumpen classes want to attain the social status of the upper and middle classes, but they lack the sophistication, self-respect and work ethics that were characteristics of elites in the past. We know sociologists and historians disapprove of the masses and peasants. As mentioned above, Marx has despised peasants as the “unchanging remnants of the past,” “rural idiots” or a “sack of potatoes,” totally unfit to lead themselves, and paradoxically, are led by their class enemies.

In the study we elaborated on the following theme: historically, Bangladesh never had self-rule as it was always under foreign rule until 1971, so there was no tradition of self-rule and no familiarity with government machinery, governance, urbanization or constitutional notions. Similarly, as *rajniti*, the Bengali equivalent of “politics,” literally means “policies or principles of the rulers,” politics or governance is not something that the people should take an interest in, according to Bangladeshi tradition. Neither the British colonial rulers nor their Pakistani successors cared much about introducing proper democracy and legitimate governments in the region. There has been only an incomplete and partial introduction of the concepts. We should not forget that while Europe took several centuries to introduce democracy and accountable government in the wake of the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution and the revolutions of 1688 and 1789, it is too ambitious to replicate democratic institutions in a country like Bangladesh. It is not possible to simply replicate modern, urban and capitalist concepts in a traditional, peasant/rural and pre-capitalist society. Only the emergence of capable, charismatic, dynamic and patriotic leadership can jumpstart the culture that promotes mutual trust and respect and a sense of belonging to the nation, which will automatically ensure good governance and the culture of development, in the comprehensive sense of the expression. The study concludes that the majority of Bangladeshis do not feel like part of the nation because of a millennium of alien rule.

This study provides an overview of the socio-economic and political history of the country during the quarter-century of the Pakistani period, which ultimately led to the emergence of Bangladesh. Various factors in Pakistan contributed to Bangladesh's emergence, including discriminatory policies against East Pakistan by West Pakistan, and the rise of the separatist movement in East Pakistan. It also examines the important role India played in dismembering its arch-rival, Pakistan. It also elaborates on Mujib's rise, fall and legacy, illustrating how a pragmatic and patriotic leader became an extravagant, narcissistic, indulgent and ruthless dictator. In his vain attempt to impose the Soviet system of dictatorship on Bangladesh, Mujib became its nemesis. He failed to decolonize the mindsets of the ruling elite and ordinary people. His legacy in Bangladesh and the political culture he cultivated negated the spirit of Bangladesh's Liberation War, which was for democracy and equal opportunities for all Bangladeshis. A former admirer of Mujib writes: "By pedigree, Sheikh Mujib was a determined foe of democracy."² From his meteoric ascendancy to power to his brutal assassination by his own people, it seems Mujib himself was his worst enemy. An unprepared and incompetent leader which he was, loved power and his cronies. And at the end of the day, tragically, he lost both. Lawrence Ziring is right: "A more humble man would have acknowledged the sacrifice of a diverse order of Bengalis and would have insisted on a minor role for himself."³ Mujib retained corrupt and inefficient officials and ministers. Even worse, he was getting out of touch with small towns and rural areas. He rewarded friends and neglected freedom fighters. A senior journalist, late ABM Musa succinctly appraised Mujib as one, who "promised everything and betrayed everybody."⁴

The study also provides an assessment of the Zia and Ershad regimes. There is nothing more obvious than the differences between them. Zia's government was honest and efficient, with low corruption, but Ershad's was the epitome of corruption, hedonism, opportunism and ultimately degenerating and demoralizing for Bangladeshis from all walks of life. With Zia's intervention, the country was able to salvage its "international basket case" image. He denationalized all nationalized business enterprises and industries under the Mujib administration. In addition to introducing garment industries to the country, he took major steps to send thousands of expatriate workers to the Arab world and Southeast Asia. Now the garment sector and expatriate workers generate the bulk of foreign exchange for the

country. The Zia administration deserves credit for choosing efficient people as his ministers and administrators. Meanwhile, Ershad not only condoned corruption, but was also corrupt himself. He was almost like another Marcos in the Philippines. Additionally, he introduced Islam as the State Religion, which successive governments have been unable to abolish. A satirical cartoon of Ershad, also known as the *Vishwa Behaya* or the Shameless of the World (published minutes before cartoonist Qamrul Hasan's death), illustrates how well Ershad understood his nation's psychology. With money and state patronage, he made full use of the fact that almost everybody had a price to pay for their loyalty. Ershad contributed greatly to the degradation of moral and ethical values among Bangladeshis.

The appraisal of the "Battling Begums" highlights the contrasts between Khaleda's "authoritarian-democracy" with Hasina's "proto-fascist" rule. Between January 2009 and December 2021, the Hasina Regime has been viewed as "the worst of times" since the Liberation. The mysterious BDR Massacre occurred only two months after she became Prime Minister for the second time. We only have multiple conspiracy theories as possible explanations to the tragedy. In addition to this, it is a mystery to me why her government decided to arrest, try and execute several politicians who had been elected members of the parliament successively; and more importantly, at least one of them had been a very close friend of the Prime Minister herself for almost four decades! There is no clear explanation for why a hitherto (almost) unknown Islamist outfit called Hefazat-e-Islam suddenly appeared on 25th May 2013! One does not know why some atheist bloggers' offensive writings against Islam and Prophet Muhammad triggered such a violent protest. Last but not least, why thousands of Hefazat protesters stayed overnight at Motijheel Commercial Area in Dhaka, and Hasina's police killed at least sixty of the protesters in the early hours of 26th May. Her "voter-less" and thoroughly rigged election on 30th December 2018 installed her back into power. We know there has never been an election of this magnitude in Bangladesh or the rest of South Asia.

The elaboration on the factors leading to the persecution and marginalization of the so-called *Biharis* or non-Bengali immigrants in Bangladesh during the Liberation War and in the wake of it, and their short- and long-term consequences adds a new dimension to the study of modern and contemporary Bangladesh. Very few scholars have shed any light on

the suffering of the marginalized *Biharis* in Bangladesh. Bengalis killed tens of thousands of them, and raped and then killed their women and children and expropriated them almost completely in 1971 and early 1972. The reason for their unwillingness to accept them as Bangladeshis is not merely due to their ethnolinguistic prejudice, but they are also concerned about losing out on the properties that were either forcibly taken from the *Biharis* or purchased at a nominal price after the Liberation. In sum, although in 2008, the Bangladesh government accepted the *Biharis* (who till then were known as “Stranded Pakistanis”), about half-a-million Urdu-speaking people in the country have neither yet been fully integrated as equal citizens of Bangladesh, nor got back their properties confiscated as “enemy properties” soon after the Liberation in early 1972. Although Bangladesh has officially accepted the mythical figure of “three million” Bengalis as victims of Pakistani atrocities, few Bangladeshis believe tens of thousands of *Biharis* were killed, raped and expropriated by Bengalis in 1971. Hence, *Biharis* not only lost their lives, honour and property in the country, but those still alive are also denied dignity and even a true account of their sufferings.

The illustration of the enigmatic transformation of Bangladeshi Muslims’ collective sense of belonging or identity, not long after the emergence of Bangladesh is an important aspect of this study. As we know, Pakistan came into being on the basis of Muslim separatism, which—sort of—emerged out of a contrived or false sense of belonging or identity among Muslims in the Subcontinent. We also know, not long after the emergence of Pakistan, many if not most East Bengali Muslims started believing in the primacy of their Bengali rather than Muslim identity, which in less than a quarter-century led to the creation of Bangladesh, apparently signalling the triumph of their secular Bengali identity against the Muslim identity of Pakistan. However, as this chapter elucidates, many Bangladeshi Muslims (including those who had whole-heartedly supported the creation of Bangladesh) started reverting to the old and discarded Islamic identity as their primordial one. This chapter illustrates the shifting identity of Bangladeshi Muslims which is all about espousing Islam—both spiritual and political—by turning their back on secular Bengali nationalism. It helps us understand that this is not unique from any stretch of the imagination as it happened elsewhere in the Muslim World. Several Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Pakistan

and even “ultra-secular” Turkey, have started championing political and dogmatic Islam.

Thanks to the exposure of Bangladeshi workers to the Arab world, the overwhelming influence of Wahhabism and Islamic orthodoxy is noticeable among all sections of Bangladeshi Muslims. Consequently, they have become much more ritualistic, ultra-orthodox and illiberal than their predecessors during the British or Pakistani period. Last but not least, Islam has been the State Religion since 1988. Most importantly, despite the unbelievable transformation of the bulk of Bangladeshi Muslims apparently into devout and practicing Muslims—as demonstrated by the phenomenal rise in the number of mosques and madrasas, hijab wearing women, growing popularity of “Islamic attire” among men and women—the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi Muslims are among the most corrupt and unethical people anywhere in the world. They include politicians, business and professional elites, bureaucrats, judges, police, teachers, and even madrasa teachers and imams.

“Culture matters” is possibly unique in any study of modern and contemporary Bangladesh from historical or sociological perspective. The study of the cultural factors of poverty and underdevelopment is another unique aspect of this study. It elucidates the important role culture has played in Bangladesh leading to bad governance, retarded growth and lopsided development in the country. While one extreme narrative defends the half-baked theory about Bangladesh being on the highway of development, another version of the story is about the ground reality. It argues that while Bangladesh is still among the forty-six LDCs in the world, the culture that promotes corruption and bad governance is responsible for the uncertain future of this over-populated, resource-poor country in South Asia. To conclude this discussion on the culture of development and underdevelopment, this chapter has spelt out the major differences between static and progressive culture. Last but not least, members of any traditional static culture do not live to work but work to live; are jealous of success; irrational, believers in sorcery and magic; superstitions; and are fatalist by nature. In terms of Bangladeshi culture, we believe there are few more appropriate examples than Lawrence Harrison’s definition of static culture.⁵

So far as myth-busting is concerned, the study has demolished some ahistorical, mythical narratives on people, their ideologies and politics, and events leading to the colonization, decolonization and the Partition of

Bengal in 1947; and what led to Bangladesh and what has actually gone wrong with the nation-state since its Liberation in 1971. Firstly, Pakistan was never imposed on Bengali Muslims and Jinnah was not prejudiced against Bengali Muslims; the Language Movement was a political movement against Pakistan, not a movement for “saving” the Bengali language in East Bengal, which non-Bengali Pakistani rulers never wanted to kill; the economic disparity between the two wings of Pakistan was not “always deliberate,” there were historical factors behind East Bengalis’ gross under-representation in the bureaucracy, armed forces and business; Pakistan was not a “democracy” in the pre-Ayub period, rather his “Basic Democracy” was much more democratic than what prevailed in the country up to 1958; Mujib never declared independence on 26th March 1971 or ever; Bengali “freedom fighters” (who were actually ill-equipped insurgents) never liberated Bangladesh—it was almost solely an Indian victory against the Pakistani occupation forces—they even did not liberate a single town of Bangladesh, until early December 1971, when India had formally declared war against Pakistan. And we know the mythical figure of “three million dead” in the Liberation War. In sum, the collective political culture of Bangladesh is at the roots of the overall underdevelopment of the country.

Having defended the Bengalis’ justification for the creation of Bangladesh, one may, however, argue that the partially unintended and partially deliberate installation of the lumpen bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariat as the ruling, business and professional elites of Bangladesh by the successive governments of the country since Liberation is going to cost the country, dearly. The lumpen elites, again, also mostly devoid of proper education, ethical values and civility, have virtually turned the country into a corrupt and dysfunctional one. Thus, not only the adverse effects of global warming and demographic pressure are posing serious existential threats to the country within thirty years or so, the cataclysmic effects of the systematic destruction of the education system, the non-diversification of the sources of job and wealth generation, and the unimpeded mass emigration of educated youths (mostly from well-to-do families), mainly to North America and Europe, are also going to be the biggest challenges to the country, not in the distant future. Along with the mass emigration of educated youths, the country loses more than \$6 billion through money launderers who siphon off the money out of the country, every year.

As considering economism as the main factor behind the Partition is grossly misleading, so is believing in the primacy of economic factors behind the emergence of Bangladesh. As the inherent and man-made economic disparities between the two wings of Pakistan did not automatically lead to Bangladesh, so the implementation of the so-called Two-Economy theory of Rehman Sobhan et al., or the Six Points of the Awami League under Mujib (which would translate Sobhan's theory into practice), would not keep the two estranged wings of the country together, indefinitely. The East Bengali contempt against the western wing of Pakistan and the "non-Bengalis" in general predate the emergence of Pakistan. Northwest Indian contempt for Bengalis is as old as the British ascendancy in the Subcontinent when Calcutta (Kolkata) replaced Delhi as the capital and main metropolis of the Empire. Not long after Calcutta had become the capital of British India, Bengali Hindus emerged as the most dominant people in the raj, as professionals, landlords, businessmen, government officials and as one of the most loyal subjects of the British. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Bengali phobia maybe cited in this regard. In other words, the hatred between West Pakistanis and East Bengalis, in general, were mutual. East Bengalis never ever reconciled with the ethnocentric prejudice they came across from their compatriots in the western wing and "non-Bengalis" living in East Pakistan. Thus, West Pakistani and "non-Bengali" prejudice against Bengalis, which was very humiliating hence undesirable to the latter, led to Bangladesh. Jinnah's March 1948 speech in Dhaka in favour of "only Urdu" as the state language of Pakistan laid the foundation stone of Bengali separatism in East Bengal.

Then again, thanks to the rapid and sharp qualitative decline in the standard of higher education since the fast adoption of Bengali as the medium of college education, the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi college/university graduates from Bengali medium institutions are simply not employable in the private sector, where the employees' efficiency is the prime concern of the employers. No wonder, tens of thousands of skilled Indians work in Bangladesh and remit several billion dollars to India out of Bangladesh. The World Bank in its 2019 Report has revealed some distressing and frightening statistics with regard to the rate of unemployment among the public university graduates, which was as high as 46 per cent. There has been a mass exodus of bright students and almost all the children from the well-to-do classes in the country, who can afford to

leave Bangladesh as students and/or prospective employees in North America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere. The youth bulge, rapid growth in unemployable and unemployed college graduates, and the growing number of illegal Indian workers in the private sector in Bangladesh—which remits billions of dollars home every year—is going to cost the country, dearly in coming years. Of late, manufacturing inflated statistics of growth and development has become a favourite pastime of the ruling party leaders and supporters. Whilst, over two million job seekers enter the job market every year, as mentioned above, in February 2021, the UN classified Bangladesh as one of the forty-six LDCs in the world. One cannot agree more with Quibria that while Bangladesh cannot do much or nothing to address the exogenous problems vis-à-vis the ready-made garment sector, retrenchment of Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf, and river erosion and climate change issues, but the country must ensure good governance, as “poor governance is a luxury a resource-scarce, a developing country can hardly afford.” Bangladesh can ill-afford premature deindustrialization, and must diversify its sources of income to be viable economically. Definitely, “it is difficult to get the economics right without getting the politics right.”⁶

Meanwhile, rampant corruption and bad governance leading to the almost total collapse of the law and order situation have turned Bangladesh into one of the least liveable ones. A report by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development substantiates the above assertion. It says: “The rate of seeking political asylum by Bangladeshis in overseas doubled in last five years [2014–2019] due to repressive political environment and violation of basic rights in the country.”⁷ Interestingly, Hasina’s Finance Minister Mustafa Kamal reveals, the amount the bank defaulters from six nationalized banks in the country alone increased by more than Tk 51 billion in the January–March quarter of 2019, and the number of defaulters increased by 58,436.⁸ We know only politically well-connected people can afford to be bank defaulters in the country. And, they never ever return the money to the financial institutions and launder the stolen money to overseas financial institutions. The Washington-based Global Financial Integrity reveals in its report, styled as *Illicit Financial Flows to and from 148 Developing Countries: 2006–2015*, released in January 2019, that the “illicit financial outflow or money laundering from Bangladesh was ranging from 2.7 billion US dollars to 5.9 billion US dollars in 2015.”⁹ As Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, the Chairman of the National Board of

Revenue of Bangladesh revealed at a press conference in Dhaka, while around forty million Bangladeshis should be paying income tax, more than 90 per cent of them evade paying any income tax to the government.¹⁰ Most importantly, the country's reserve bank Bangladesh Bank's former governor Mohammed Farashuddin has said that US\$65 billion were laundered to foreign countries between 2004 and 2014 out of Bangladesh.¹¹ One may assume that as of March 2021, the estimated figure would be around \$100 billion.

One may mention some tips of the iceberg of hundreds of mega financial scandals, where influential cronies of the ruling party have been involved in various ways. The Padma Bridge scandal is one of them. The World Bank cancelled its concessional loan amounting to \$1.2 billion to build the country's longest bridge over the Padma, citing concerns of corruption in 2012. A powerful Hasina minister's name came out in the Bank's investigation. The Hallmark scandal, which even the *New York Times* mentioned that between 2010 and 2012, one of the largest state-owned banks, Sonali Bank, illegally gave out \$454 million in loans, including nearly \$344 million to Hallmark Group, a textile business, which connived with a branch manager to issue fraudulent letters of credit to fictitious companies. The daily also mentioned another financial scandal about \$565 million in bank assets that were said to have been defrauded from the state-owned BASIC Bank between 2009 and 2012 allegedly in connivance with senior bank officials. A recent 2018 national survey of more than 15,000 households in the country reported that "the majority of those sampled fell prey to some form of corruption in obtaining services from both the public and private sectors. Law enforcement agencies (police) were rated as the most corrupt among the 18 services included in the study, followed by passport offices and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority."¹²

In the above backdrop, it is evident that the roots of all Bangladeshi crises lie in the crisis of ethics, which again derives out of culture. No durable and sustainable development is ever possible in the country—it can never ever become another Singapore and South Korea, let alone Switzerland—almost with the total absence of any ethics among the overwhelming majority of the population. Since Thrasymachus has argued, ethics is all about what the stronger imposes on the weaker. Hobbes has argued that what the good superordinate or ruler introduces as certain codes of conduct for the subordinates to follow is ethics; and life without ethics is

“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Although Rousseau has argued that our innate feelings of compassion make us ethical, I believe ethics is integral to our culture, which is an acquired behaviour, we learn from our elders and others. Most importantly, our ethics gets corrupted or even dies under adverse conditions. The long tradition of alien rule and colonialism, and consequential bad governance that followed, programmed the Bengali psyche to be corrupt, greedy, selfish and unkind. Thus, not only geography and the dreadful demographic pressure are against Bangladesh, but the state of unpreparedness and any long-term planning by the successive governments to beat the hostile geography and growing demographic pressure are also obstacles to long-term sustenance and sustainable development. In sum, as renowned scholar, Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore has elaborated on, the key to his country’s success has been adherence to the “MPH” that stands for Meritocracy, Pragmatism and Honesty. In other words, since there is nothing called an “economic problem,” all evils associated with bad governance are cultural by nature. As things are in Bangladesh, in a state of decay and stagnation, its fate is going to be not that different from what Le Bon says happens to such societies: “When the structure of civilization is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall.” He also has no kind words for a mass rule: “Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase.”¹³

Now, one may highlight two traits in the collective psyche of the Bangladeshis in general, which include their perennial and shifting identities; and their lack of commitment to ideologies and people. And, we know, people suffering from identity crises cannot build a durable nation-state. Since the 1940s, the bulk of the population was passionately committed to the idea of Pakistan, considering Jinnah only next to Prophet Muhammad as their dearest leader and guide. And, we know, in less than a year after achieving Pakistan, many East Bengali Muslims started questioning Jinnah’s integrity and love for Bengalis. In less than a quarter-century, the same people who once almost worshipped Jinnah, replace him with Mujib, and in 1975, they celebrated the violent overthrow of Mujib and his one-party dictatorship. Since then the polity is sharply divided between pro-and anti-Mujib camps. We also know, despite Rabindranath Tagore’s unambiguous Islamophobic writings, many Bangladeshi Muslims are in love with everything he wrote and said. They have even chosen his controversial song “*Amar Sonar Bangla*” he wrote in 1905 against the

Partition of Bengal, as their national anthem. We also know Bangladesh, as it exists today, is a by-product of another Partition (of Bengal and India) in 1947 or Pakistan, which was again possible because of Bengali Muslims' whole-hearted support for the concept of Pakistan.

Another very disturbing trait in the collective culture of the people in Bangladesh—which is also common in South Asia and elsewhere in the Third World—is their lack of self-respect, which again is another dimension of their lack of any commitment to ideologies and personalities. One may catalogue hundreds of names of apparently respectful and highly educated people who were/are utterly shameless and even self-denigrating. All the people who publicly sided with the corrupt and degenerated regime of dictator General Ershad may be categorized among the most shameless people in Bangladesh. One may mention three veteran politicians and one renowned economist, the late Ataur Rahman Khan, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, Captain Abdul Halim Chowdhury and Professor Wahidul Haque, respectively, in this regard. Very interestingly, Khan and Chowdhury joined Ershad's cabinet—the former as his Prime Minister—while until the day before, they had been championing the movement, “Restoration of Democracy in Bangladesh” by the overthrow of dictator Ershad. They changed sides having no guilt or any trace of shame. Their identity crisis, lack of commitment to ideologies, leaders and patrons, and even their self-denigrating behaviour reflect the psyche of the “peasants in a business suit,” as elaborated in Chap. 9. The nouveau riche and lumpen elements are well entrenched everywhere in Bangladesh, especially since Hasina's second ascendancy to power in 2009.

Hasina's regime is dependent on direct patronage from India, which is all about containing China. China cannot afford to destabilize the Hasina regime as it has billions invested in Bangladesh and long-term strategic interests in keeping India out. Bangladesh's domestic policy dynamics are also a reflection of the country's uncertain short- and long-term future. How Bangladesh can reverse the process of rapidly declining ethical values, civility and education standards, and the erosion of the middle class and middle-class values is the question! Can the well-wishers of Bangladesh leave things in the country to stew for an indefinite period when the two major political parties, the ruling Awami League and the opposition BNP, feed off each other pathologically in the absence of mutual trust and respect?

The country is under pressure from poor resource management, rising demographics, global warming and its ecological consequences. The question is “Is the delta headed for boom or bust?”¹⁴ Other questions, which produce pessimistic answers, include: (a) How long can the government subordinate facts to distorted data and blatant lies? (b) Can the country sustain itself while the bulk of the second and third generations of Bangladeshis from well-to-do families (born between the early 1970s and the early 2000s) have emigrated to North America, Europe, Australia or elsewhere in the developed world? Most new emigrants are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of English-educated middle- and upper-class Bengali Muslim families. During the last days of the British Raj (1930s–1940s) through the Pakistan era, and the first two decades of independent Bangladesh, their grandparents and great-grandparents were mainly professionals, bureaucrats, educators, or small landlords and businessmen. Bangladesh has been unable to halt the exodus of its top brains.

Because Bangladesh remains an LDC as of late 2021, one wonders if the hyper-rosy picture of Bangladesh as a developed country in the coming years is inaccurate.¹⁵ Bangladeshi development economist Rashed Titumir challenges the dominant international narrative of “development surprise” or “development conundrum” in Bangladesh, given the country’s lack of good governance. While Titumir and Quibria are not fans of the GDP growth trap, M. Mujeri and N. Mujeri also believe GDP growth without poverty alleviation and removal of gross inequality would make Bangladesh’s development “to fall down in the face of reality.”¹⁶ Only through inclusive growth; accessible health, food and quality education; removing capital flight from the country; social justice; and global warming and environmental sustainability, Bangladesh can graduate from LDC to developing country by 2027.¹⁷ However, it is unclear if the Hasina regime or the deep state in Bangladesh is in charge. Nevertheless, given the messy situation in Bangladesh, we simply cannot believe that another Meiji Restoration, Park Chung-hee, Lee Kuan Yew or Mahathir Mohamed could possibly reverse the degeneration process in the country. Every country goes through its own unique history of progress and regress, which varies widely depending on factors like demography, geography and political culture. However, historically, backward nations have often learnt the art of good governance from advanced ones. Quality education of its citizens,

however, plays a crucial role in good governance and the development of a nation—both infrastructural and superstructural. And Bangladesh lags behind in both areas. In addition, the state of higher education in the country, as reported by the Times Higher Education Supplement, also suffers substantially. The study reveals that among the top 400 universities in Asia, Bangladesh has none, while Nepal has two, Sri Lanka has two, Pakistan has nine and India has forty-nine.¹⁸ The rate of educated youth unemployment in this country is over 40 per cent, which is also a disaster.¹⁹

Nobody has highlighted the extreme fragility of Bangladesh, economically, politically and ecologically better than M.G. Quibria, in the recent past. Seemingly, everyone is overwhelmed by the government propaganda that Bangladesh has already become a middle-income country, and is going to be another Switzerland or Singapore, in no time! Quibria's appraisal of risks and challenges Bangladesh is going to face by the middle of this century is very objective and alarming at the same time. He has rightly pointed out flaws with all the four “drivers of development” in the country: ready-made garments, labour migration and remittances, agriculture and NGOs. He draws an abysmal picture of all of them. He is emphatic that robots—such as Sewbos or Sewbots—are going to replace tens of thousands of garment factory workers within twenty years or so. And, we know, one robotic sewing machine can replace around ten factory workers. His other projection about Bangladesh is also very nerve-wracking for the country; that is, sooner than later, Gulf countries, where millions of unskilled Bangladeshis work and remit billions of dollars to the motherland, are going to replace unskilled foreign workers through the *Saudization*, *Emiratization*, *Kuwaitization*, *Qatarization* and *Omanization* programmes. Already the process has begun. By 2017, Saudi Arabia retrenched around 800,000 foreign workers, and many more are being sent home regularly. NGOs are also going to face a crunch as international grants will be withdrawn once the country graduates from its LDC status (by 2024 or 2026). While Bangladesh cannot do much or nothing to address the exogenous problems vis-à-vis the ready-made the garment sector, retrenchment of Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf, and the river erosion and climate change issues, but the country must ensure good governance, as poor governance is a luxury a resource-scarce, a developing country like Bangladesh can hardly afford. Bangladesh can ill-afford premature

deindustrialization, and must diversify its sources of income to be viable economically.²⁰

Last but not least, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) of the United States has recently painted a grim picture of Bangladesh. The country scored sixteen negative and four positive indices out of twenty relating to governance, growth and development, which is the worst score for the country in the past eighteen years. Bangladesh is ranked poorly in terms of corruption control, political rights, effective governance, land rights, trade policy, freedom of information, gender equality in economic matters and public expenditures on health care and primary education. The country has underperformed in terms of freedom for civilians, rule of law, credit availability, child health and overall fiscal policy. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) chief Iftekharuzzaman believes the report reflects the truth, which is very concerning.²¹

Bangladeshi economist Salim Raihan believes: “Bangladesh is near the bottom of the list of countries with the lowest ratios of public expenditure on both education and health to the GDP, which was less than 2 per cent and 0.39 per cent respectively in 2018With such a poor public spending record in education and health, it is impossible for Bangladesh to register substantial progress towards attaining SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] by 2030.”²² This writer’s own survey on the level of poverty in Dhaka city in 2016 reveals that even among the “most well-off” sections of the working-class people in the city (private motor-vehicle and auto-rickshaw drivers) who earn around Tk 24,000 or around \$300 per month (compared to the bulk of garment factory workers and domestic help, who make less than \$100 per month) are among the poorest, whose calorie intake is low, having very little or no medical coverage, and live in unhygienic slums. Seven per cent of urban Bangladeshis are forced to skip one meal daily; 21 per cent of people worry about food sustenance, and they spend more than 50 per cent of their income on food and around 20 per cent on rent.²³

Thus, nothing could be more damaging than the myth of Bangladesh emerging as another Asian Tiger in coming years. A report published by the UN in July 2019 about the state of hunger in the country is not flattering at all. The report reveals that one in every six is underfed/hungry and their number has grown during 2008–2018; and that over the previous decade the number of undernourished people had risen by almost a million, from

23.85 million to 24.2 million in 2018. And, the findings come at a time when the country was said to have made commendable improvements in its food security status, reveals the report titled “State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019,” prepared by the FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. The report affirms what we know already, that food availability does not mean food access for all.²⁴

What is very alarming is that Bangladesh is losing “no less than 1 per cent” of arable land, every year, due to human settlement, roads, depletion of groundwater, river-bank erosion and salinity every year. The country loses 25,000 acres of land to river erosion alone, every year. By 2050, the country will lose 30 per cent of cropland and the consequential decline in crop production. By 2050 one in every seven Bangladeshi will be displaced by climate change. At least eighteen million people (it could be as high as thirty-five million) may have to move elsewhere because of sea level rise alone. Around 11 per cent of its land will be gone under the sea in low-lying coastal districts in greater Khulna, Barisal and Chittagong districts, which means rice production could decline by eight per cent and wheat by 32 per cent.²⁵ In view of the above, is it too alarmist to suggest that Bangladesh after another fifty years will become one of the poorest and unliveable countries in the world, if it partially survives the disastrous climate change?

In conclusion, Bangladesh’s prospects in the next fifty years seem rather bleak. It is still possible to reverse the process by socially and politically engineering the polity of Bangladesh. The country requires a dynamic transformation akin to the Meiji Restoration or what South Korea and Singapore have undergone since the 1960s. Education reform is a sine qua non for the country, which desperately needs modern and secular educated urbane elites, professionals, teachers and administrators, which existed more or less until the early 1980s. In lieu of three streams of education, such as Bengali, English and Madrasa (Islamic), only one should be offered, focusing on modern, secular, science-oriented education, with at least one European language taught to every student (preferably English). The country needs to end the dominance of the “peasants in a business suit” and the overpowering influence of the ultra-conservative mullahs or clerics who cannot co-exist as power brokers in a secular, liberal democracy.

The multiple problems plaguing Bangladesh are both historical and self-inflicted. The postcolonial Third World entity, which is also part of the Muslim World, has almost all the predicaments associated with the culture

of postcolonialism, the Third World, and the Muslim World. Bangladeshis generally grow up angry, corrupt, disrespectful, and unethical. These traits can be attributed to their collective memory of colonial extortion, as well as their experiences living under postcolonial governments since 1947 who reproduce the colonial mode of governance that fosters over-developed bureaucracies and undermines the equal opportunity for ordinary people. Therefore, the country is not fully prepared to embrace liberal democracy, secularism, and modernism, much less postmodern ideas. Bangladesh must break the vicious cycles of premodern ideas and institutions, including dynastic rule, which is a source of perpetual animosity between Mujib's successors and Zia's followers.

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¹ Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.



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