

1971 Liberation war, birth of Bangladesh

Introduction

The 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh against Pakistan continues shaping the mindset of Bangladeshi people until present day. This bloodstained historical event has constructed Bangladeshi sense of nationalism and has forged their contemporary Constitution. The Bangladesh we see today is essentially the fruit of the liberation war of 1971. In order to understand ongoing Bangladeshi politics and the socio-economic sphere, it is required to analyse the history of Pakistani colonialism and the events surrounding the 1971 liberation war that turned Bangladesh into an independent sovereign State. This research paper provides a profound overview of these historical narratives and draws a comparison between present day Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent and Creation of Pakistan

The liberation war of Bangladesh was not merely a war for independence fought by Bangladeshi nationalists - one of its main triggers was religion. The Pakistani government wanted to turn Bangladeshis into exemplary Muslims by alienating them from their Hindu background. This concept of religious division was also used as a root cause for the creation of Pakistan in the first place following British colonialism of the subcontinent. Ironically, religion brought together Bangladesh and Pakistan as one State during the partition of the subcontinent and later the very same religion separated the two. Comprehending the development of the liberation war of Bangladesh involves a meticulous retrospective look into the events leading to the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Following the devastating effects of the Second World War, the British colonialists gave up their control over the Indian subcontinent and the 1947 partition outlined two independent nations - India and Pakistan.

- **Lahore Resolution** The outcry for a Muslim state started long before the partition. The demand for a Muslim state by the Muslim leaders of British India was strongly expressed during 1940 through the Lahore Resolution, also known as the Pakistan Demand or Pakistan Resolution. The Pakistan Demand was born out of fear of Muslims becoming a minority in predominantly Hindu India. Muslim leaders were worried that in a Hindu-majority democratic State, Muslims would have a difficult time protecting their rights. During a three day long (March 22 - 24, 1940) annual session of the political group of British India called the All India Muslim League, the Lahore

Resolution was crafted as a political demand to create a separate state for the Muslims of British India. It was a joint effort of the Muslim authorities from present day Pakistan and the Bengal state of British India. According to them, Muslims, on their own, were a distinct nation. Their philosophy regarding life was significantly different compared to that of Hindus. Even though the demand was based on religious differences, the Lahore Resolution did not imply a desire for an Islamic State. It suggested the creation of a self-determined Muslim region where they can exercise their rights without being subject to any racial or religious discrimination. The Lahore Resolution gained popularity among the Muslim majority of British India, especially in those provinces that perceived discrimination from Hindu leaders. Their social and political grievances found expression in the Lahore resolution. The phrasing of the latter did not mention Pakistan, however it was labelled as the Pakistan demand by the Hindu dominated media, which described it as a conspiracy aiming to divide the Indian subcontinent. Despite the fact that the text of the resolution mentioned the creation of “Independent States” instead of only one single State, leader of the Muslim League, Jinnah, diverged from this statement later on.

- **The Partition**

The dream of creating a separate Muslim state came into being when the partition of the subcontinent finally happened during 1947. Unfortunately, this partition was a tragic one. It led to the migration of millions of people. Muslims left India for Pakistan and Hindus left Pakistan for India. Massive communal violence took place during the process. Millions of lives were lost. Many became homeless, abandoning everything they had behind for their new homeland. Bangladesh, being a Muslim majority area was incorporated in Pakistan as East-Pakistan. Religious affinity was given priority over geographical distance and cultural and linguistic differences.

Discrimination and Exploitation by West-Pakistan

The Muslims of Bengal hoped that in the new Muslim state they would finally achieve a better standard of life. Given their past inferiority to Hindu landlords, Bengal Muslims were looking forward to the West-Pakistani government to ensure their fundamental rights. However, events did not unfold as the Bengali people had hoped. The West-Pakistani government proved even more discriminatory towards the people of East-Pakistan in all spheres of life - social, political and economic.

- **Political Discrimination**

The government's headquarters were established in the Western Wing. Besides, the political representation of the different ethnic groups was not equal in the Central Government. It was dominated by elite groups of West-Pakistan, mainly the Punjabis. Minority ethnic groups, such as the Bengali population, did not have significant representation in the government. Consequently, control over state-owned organizations, governmental mechanisms and the armed forces were in the hands of the dominant ethnic group. During the years of 1947 - 1971, Pakistan experienced prolonged phases of military rule, which made it more difficult for ethnic minorities to gain access to political power. The Bengali population did not even have satisfactory political representation in their own province. Even for higher government posts such as "Governor-General," Bengalis were not considered good enough.

Such positions were awarded to people from West-Pakistan or migrants from India who assumed Pakistani citizenship. At the initial stages of the government's creation, the West-Pakistanis sought various mechanisms to avoid handing over power to East Bengal, which harboured the majority in terms of population size. The elites of West-Pakistan tried several ways to capture the control and succeeded in their attempts to dominate East Bengal through the central government in West-Pakistan. However, the power struggle continued between different political parties and the Western elites were forced to accept the role of Bengalis in politics, through the process of creating and abandoning several drafts of the National Assembly, that gave Bengalis a satisfactory share of representation in the constitution of 1956. Before this could yield any positive outcome for the unification of the two wings of Pakistan, the country fell prey to military rule and previous assemblies were again dissolved.

During the reign of the military General Ayub Khan, the Eastern Wing suffered immeasurable losses. Political parties were not allowed to participate in the 1962 elections and many politicians of East-Pakistan were prevented from propagating their ideologies. The Ayub Khan Government was exclusively in favour of the Western Wing and kept power highly concentrated there. East-Pakistan's discontent against the West-Pakistani Government exacerbated when security measures adopted to defend the Eastern Wing were neglected during the war between India and Pakistan in 1965. Following the fall of General Ayub Khan, the next General, Yahya Khan attained dominance over Pakistan. Yahya Khan promised to hold the first General Elections in Pakistan and eventually fulfilled his pledge in 1970. Yahya's hope to restore peace and mutual co-operation among the Eastern and Western wing were soon banished. The results of the 1970 elections were

fatal for the political elites of the Western Wing because Awami League, a dominant political party from the Eastern Wing, won the elections. They were able to secure 160 seats out of 300 seats despite failing to secure any seats in the Western Wing. Similarly, no political party from the Western Wing was able to obtain a seat in the Eastern Wing. The parties were only capable in mobilizing the population in their respective provinces. Based on the majority of votes secured by Awami League, for the first time in history, an East-Pakistani political group were to get access to power in Pakistan. Since this did not meet the interests of the Western Wing political elite, a conspiracy was hatched. Following the victory of Sheikh Mujib, leader of Awami League, and his demands for East-Pakistan's development, General Yahya Khan declared that a meeting of the National Assembly will be held on the 3rd of March 1971. Dominant political leaders of the political parties in the Western Wing including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan's Peoples Party and other army officials convinced Yahya Khan to cancel the National Assembly, which was supposed to be held in Dhaka in March. The cancellation announcement came on the 1st of March 1971. Immediately after this notice civil unrest spread over East-Pakistan and mass demonstrations flooded the streets. Protests were held and calls for independence were chanted. The spark of the Liberation War of Bangladesh was ignited.

- **Economic exploitation**

The misery of East-Pakistan was not only due to the political hegemony of the Western Wing. Although political power was concentrated in West-Pakistan, in theory the authorities were capable of pacifying the people of East-Pakistan if only economic claims were satisfied. East-Pakistan faced severe economic exploitation and the relation between the two wings was analogous to the ruthless economic abuse of the British colonial power over the subcontinent. Alike the British, the West-Pakistani government profited from the Eastern Wing but did not invest adequately in its development. The number of East-Pakistanis employed in the Western Wing, particularly in higher respectable positions was insignificant compared to that of West-Pakistanis. Even though the population size of West-Pakistan was smaller compared to that of East-Pakistan after the partition, a major share of national budget (75%) was spent on West-Pakistan, leaving a negligible portion for East-Pakistan. The latter was financially deprived although it was responsible for the generation of 62% of the revenue income. Gross negligence towards the region was evident in the distribution of other resources as well. The Western Wing had 25 times higher military personnel compared to that of the Eastern Wing. The indifference of the West-Pakistan government towards the development of East-Pakistan was visible through the per capita income

of that period, which was 32% higher for West-Pakistan during the period of 1959-60 and 61% during 1969-1970. In response to the war of 1965 between Pakistan and India, during which East-Pakistan was left with meagre military defense, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman drew up the Six Point Demand (known as the Six Point Movement or Charter of Freedom) to express the demands for economic development for the East Wing. The focus of the Six Point Demand was on establishing Pakistan as a Federal State in order to consolidate the autonomy of the East Wing and its control over resources. Proving grounds of this pledge were the creation of two separate currencies for the two wings; independent foreign reserves; East Wing's self-governance over its foreign exchange earnings and taxes from trade. Additionally, to raise and maintain a self-contained armed force in the Eastern Wing as they further demanded access to economic and military resources. The Six Point Demands gathered widespread support from the Eastern Wing but were rejected by the political power of the Western Wing.

The Six Points Movement is a significant turnover in the history of Bangladesh. Despite being initially rejected, it became a core component of the election campaign of Sheikh Mujib during the election of 1970. It embraced the Mujib's campaign on yielding equal access to economic opportunities for everyone.

- **Social Exploitation**

Since the very formation of Pakistan, the Western part branded the Eastern as inferior, because it considered the Muslims in the Eastern Wing subordinate due to their social and cultural affiliation with the Hindu population, which were powerful, rich and dominating in East-Pakistan before the partition of the subcontinent. As a result of the partition many influential Hindus left East-Pakistan to join India. Nonetheless, the Hindu population still counted as one of the major ethnic groups present in the Eastern Wing. Historically, people from various religions had always co-existed peacefully in the East Wing, as they were naturally adopting practices and customs from one another, while tolerating everyone's traditions and beliefs. Even today, Muslim communities celebrate programs that hold a Hindu foundation and have barely no roots or relevance to Islam. The West-Pakistani government was critical about the intimacy between the Muslim and the Hindu population. Even though the Muslims of the East Wing supported the partition, they were not willing to give up their own culture or language for the sake of becoming a Pakistani as envisioned by the elite of West-Pakistan. The West-Pakistani government remained insensitive to the cultural sentiments of the East-Pakistani people. The selection of a national Pakistani language became a contentious issue since the onset of its genesis. The West-Pakistan government did not pay any

heed to the language that predominated in East-Pakistan, namely Bengali. The number of Bengali speakers were higher in comparison with the number of Urdu speakers. Urdu was the language of the elite, used only by 7% of Pakistanis. In contrast, Bengali was spoken by 56% of Pakistanis. The West-Pakistani leaders did not consider this factor while choosing an official language. While arguing that Bengali can still remain a primary language for everyday use of the people in the Eastern Province, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan and the first Governor General, declared on the 24th of March 1948 during a conference in Dhaka University that Urdu will become the State language. This declaration triggered a great outrage among the people of the Eastern Wing that became to be known as the Bengali Language Movement.

Denying Bengali its status of a State language and its intended extinction were unacceptable to the Bengali people. They realized that their mother tongue would not survive the aggression of the West-Pakistani government if this decision was not protested. At that time, the abolition of the Bengali language was already felt by means of how it was being corrupted. The West-Pakistani elites administered modifications of the language by replacing Sanskrit (the basis of the language) words with Urdu words. Working-class altogether the elite of East-Pakistan took several initiatives to ensure the acknowledgment of Bengali as an official State language of Pakistan besides Urdu and English. The most prominent one was the demonstration on the 21st of February 1952. The procession sought to express defiance against the order under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. This order issued on the 20th of February 1952, prohibited any kind of demonstration or protest aimed at altering the State language. When a large group of students from Dhaka University alongside with numerous political activists brought out a procession in front of the Provincial Assembly appealing for the right of Bengali to be accepted as an official language, the armed forces opened fire at the students. Five people were killed and since then the 21st of February is celebrated in Bangladesh as Language Martyrs Day. In 1999, UNESCO proclaimed 21st February as the International Mother Tongue Day in recognition of the sacrifices rendered by Bengalis. After two years, on the 7th of May 1954, Bengali was finally granted an official status. Continuous political, economic and social exploitation took part before Bangladesh could achieve its Independence. Following are certain major events that have contributed to the resolution of this national struggle and the creation of Bangladesh as an Independent country.

- **Agartala Conspiracy Case**

The popularity of the Six Points Demand of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman instilled fear into the West-Pakistani government during the reign of General Ayub Khan. On the 19th of June 1968,

the Ayub Khan government arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman altogether with 34 other Bengali civil and military officers, charging them with conspiracy against Pakistan. The case is popularly known as the Agartala conspiracy case because General Ayub Khan claimed that Sheikh Mujib and his political associates were conspiring with the Indian Government in the city of Agartala (Tripura, India) to create an Independent Bangladesh. This case is also known as “State versus Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others”. Ayub Khan’s intention to dismiss Sheikh Mujib while underestimating his popularity, failed. People of East-Pakistan were convinced that the affair itself was a conspiracy against Sheikh Mujib and against East-Pakistan, and started a movement demanding the unconditional release of Sheikh Mujib. The revolt of the people of East-Pakistan became more fierce when one of the accused, Sergeant Zahurul Haq, was killed by a guard in his prison cell. In the face of a mass movement, General Ayub Khan was left with no other choice but to withdraw the Agartala plot and release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman alongside with all other charged on 22nd February 1969. This event happened to be one of the most crucial victories of East-Pakistan against the Government of West-Pakistan. It is widely believed that the failure of the Ayub Khan regime regarding the Agartala conspiracy case contributed significantly towards the fall of his regime.

- **Operation Searchlight**

Operation Searchlight is the planned genocide that took place on the 25th of March 1971 and was undertaken by the West-Pakistani government against its own citizens of the Eastern Wing. This plan was the result of the victory of Sheikh Mujib’s party in the General Election of Pakistan in 1970. The West-Pakistani rulers had no intention to convey the power to Sheikh Mujib and finally their National Assembly was dismissed. The dismissal brought fierce reactions among the people of East-Pakistan and Sheikh Mujib summoned a five day long strike and protests for an indefinite period. Following the five-day strike, he exhorted the East-Pakistani people to embark on an Independence struggle. Law and order collapsed as people broke curfews imposed by the West-Pakistani Government. The Bengalis occupied the streets demanding freedom and self-determination for Bangladesh. During this period, in a meeting of Awami League, the National Anthem of Bangladesh was chosen.

General Yahya Khan conceived a genocide course of action of Bengali nationalists in order to punish the people of East-Pakistan for their denial to follow the orders of the West-Pakistani Government. He arranged a military crackdown to be executed during the night of the 25th of March 1971, which aimed at eliminating the force of Bengali Nationalism from Pakistan. The objective

of Operation Searchlight was to eradicate all Bengali Nationalists including political and military oppositions within a month. The intention was to take absolute control over all major cities dominated by the Nationalist rebels. Consequently, the people of East-Pakistan witnessed one of the most cruel genocides in history. Troops from West-Pakistan marched secretly towards East-Pakistan and in the night of the 25th of March 1971, the Pakistani military started their operation in Dhaka city, the present capital city of Bangladesh. The same night, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and taken to West-Pakistan. Before his arrest, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared that East-Pakistan was to become Bangladesh - an independent sovereign country. The declaration of independence was transmitted throughout East Pakistan via an E.P.R. transmitter. Although the declaration was made on the 25th of March, its transmission took place after midnight. Since then, the 26th of March is celebrated as the Independence Day of Bangladesh.

The victims of this operation originated from all layers of the Bengali social strata. However, certain groups were primarily targeted, such as the students of Dhaka University. Two student dormitories of the Dhaka University were attacked and the Pakistani military killed around 7000 students in cold blood during one night. The military officers forced the students to dig up their own mass graves before murdering them. Teachers and employees of Dhaka University also lost their lives at the hands of the Pakistani military. The Pakistani military did not spare civilians even though the main targets were politicians (especially supporters of Awami League), activists and rebels demanding independence of the Eastern Wing. Another target of chief importance were the inhabitants of Hindu majority areas. The Pakistani military killed innocent people, burnt houses and destroyed places of worship of Hindus. The West-Pakistani Government succeeded in their dreadful mission of terrorizing the East-Pakistanis. Operation Searchlight led to the massacre of 30,000 Bengalis in a week. Almost half of the population of Dhaka fled the city in search for safe shelters elsewhere. Contrary to its objectives, the military operation, in essence designed to exterminate nationalist tendencies, gave rise to the birth of the new nation of Bangladesh. Operation Searchlight created terror but at the same time encouraged the determination of the people of East-Pakistan to secede from the oppressive Central Government. Operation Searchlight well implemented its schemes in avoiding international attention as all foreign journalists were deported and radio operations were shut down to prevent any sort of communication. A journalist named Simon John Dring stayed secretly and disseminated information to the world about the genocide and the Liberation War that lasted 9 months and in which 3 million Bengali people died.

In return for his bravery, Simon Dring won several awards for his contribution and was later solemnly recognized as a citizen of Bangladesh.

The Liberation War (March to December 1971)

Following the massacre of the 25th of March 1971, Bengalis started fighting against the Pakistani military with every resource they had. Ordinary Bengalis, especially young people, who had no knowledge or training to fight in a war, risked their lives and the lives of their family members for the sake of making Bangladesh an independent country. Following the “Black Night” of 25th of March, the atrocities of the Pakistani military aggravated. The operation was extended to the entire region of East-Pakistan.

The Bengali Nationalists assembled a shallow novice armed force called “Mukti Bahini” (The Force of Independence). The Bengali military officers of East-Pakistan took charge over the military operations of the Bengali nationalists. They divided East-Pakistan in 11 sectors in order to conduct their guerrilla operations against the West-Pakistani military. In the meantime, the Provisional Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was created in Mujibnagar by some political leaders of East-Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was a prisoner of the West-Pakistan government during that time was made the President and Tajuddin Ahmed was made the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. This event led to the official declaration of Bangladesh as an independent state.

- **Refugee Crisis**

While a lot of Bengalis joined the guerrilla force favouring independence, many others, particularly women and children, fled the country and took refuge in the closest neighbouring country - India. According to an estimate, the number of refugees taking shelter in India during the liberation war was about 10 million. The Indian government came under huge pressure to provide resources and space for the refugees. The Prime Minister of India during that period, Indira Gandhi, expressed concern over this issue but continued supporting the people of Bangladesh in their struggle for equality. Refugee camps were built in areas nearby Bangladesh such as West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura.

- **Military Support from India**

After Pakistan launched several attacks on Indian territory on the 3rd of December 1971, India joined Bangladesh in its military efforts against the Pakistani military. With the support of India as well as commands from the military officers of East-Pakistan, the West-Pakistani military was defeated. It eventually surrendered to the joint forces of Bangladesh and India leading to victory for Bangladesh on 16th of December 1971.

- **The Rajakars**

Religion was used as a diplomatic tool in shaping Pakistan into a separate nation during the partition of British India. The same religion played a vital role in ensuring support for Pakistan among people of East-Pakistan. Political groups based on religious values such as the Jamaat-E-Islami swore allegiance to the West-Pakistani government when the liberation war of Bangladesh began. Despite being Bengalis, the political leaders and supporters of Jamaat-E-Islami collaborated with the Pakistani army in their atrocities against Bengalis. The Jamaat-E-Islami was originally a social organization born in British India before partition. Its main aim was to create a unified Indian state, yet its vision was not fulfilled due to the partition of the subcontinent. It created branches in both West- and East-Pakistan with the new objective of creating an Islamic state. When Bengali nationalists demanded separation from West-Pakistan, the Jamaat-E-Islami leaders of East-Pakistan provided full support to the West-Pakistani government. In the name of religion, they betrayed the people of their own land. Their loyalty and support towards the West-Pakistani military was to the extent that they managed to create armed forces of their own that assisted the military operations of West-Pakistan. The latter government established the “East Pakistan Central Peace Committee” (Shanti Bahini) and made Ghulam Azam, the leader of Jamaat-E-Islami in East-Pakistan, the Chief of Shanti Committee. The Shanti Committee or Bahini was responsible for committing horrendous war crimes, such as killings of civilians and non-combatants and raping Bengali women. The Jamaat-E-Islami also organized their own combatant groups such as the Al-Badar and Al-Shams. One of the main tasks of the Rajakar groups was to generate lists of the details of freedom fighters, which were consequently entrusted to the West-Pakistani military. The latter identified the families of the aforementioned rebels, tortured them in return for information and eventually killed them. The most horrific transgression committed by the Rajakar groups was the abduction of Bengali women, which were transported to Pakistani military camps for the entertainment of Pakistani soldiers. During the liberation war, around 200,000 to 400,000 women became victims of rape and sexual slavery. Al-Badar, which was mainly created by the student wing of the Jamaat-E-Islami in East-

Pakistan, was specifically involved in killing “the intellectual people” (known as Budhijibi in Bengali) such as teachers, scholars and social activists. Regrettably, the exact same people who betrayed Bengalis were Bengalis themselves and pursued their own goals at the expense of their fellow nationals in order to gain political power in the post-liberation era of Bangladesh. Originally after independence, political parties based on religion were banned in Bangladesh but due to the military regime of Ziaur Rahman and later because of his political party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jamaat-E-Islami leaders who committed war crimes were allowed to enter politics. Currently they are facing justice, despite that more than four decades of independence were necessary for due process of justice to be implemented. The present Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Sheikh Mujib) has resumed the International Criminal Tribunal to prosecute the war crimes of 1971. Several significant Jamaat-E-Islami leaders accountable for them have been punished and some of them have even been given the capital punishment.

- **Atrocities Committed by the Pakistani Army**

The West-Pakistani army showed no compassion for Bengalis. The rules of engagement were at no time adhered to. The convoys of the West-Pakistani army would kill civilians without any mercy. They would bring Bengalis as prisoners and kill them remorselessly in batches. According to witnesses, the West-Pakistani army were having the capacity to torch and murder anyone that was obstructing their way. Their preferred targets were religious minorities such as Hindus. They would kill large number of Hindu men at once and would abduct women and girls. There are debates about the number of Bengalis that have been killed during the war – however in Bangladesh the estimate is 30 million people.

- **International Support**

Bangladesh received continuous moral support from India since the beginning of the Liberation War. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India during that time, was able to secure support from

the Soviet Union, The United Kingdom and France to ensure that there would be no directives in favour of Pakistan in the United Nations Security Council. In contrast, Pakistan received support from the United States and China. The United States provided ammunition while China provided moral advocacy. In spite of the protection and encouragement from the United States, Pakistan did not have high chances of winning the war because of the Soviet Union which played against the efforts of the United States during the war.

When West-Pakistan launched attacks against India on the 3rd of December 1971, the Indian military forces joined Bangladeshi guerrilla forces to fight against the West-Pakistani military. The latter did not receive any support during this crucial period of the war although they were expecting military aid from the United States and China. West-Pakistani military camps were attacked and they lost control over their previously captured territories. Consequently, they had to accept defeat and capitulate to the joint forces. Finally, in the afternoon of the 16th of December 1971, General Niazi of West-Pakistan signed the agreement of surrender. After a bloodbath of 9 months, Bangladesh was finally an Independent State. Today Bangladesh, celebrates 16th December as Victory Day.
