

**REFLECTIONS ON  
BANGLADESH:  
SPECIAL FEATURE**

# | NatStrat

Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

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# About Us

NatStrat is an independent, not-for-profit centre for research on strategic and security issues. It is headed by its Convenor, **Pankaj Saran**, and has **Shantanu Mukharji** as its Adviser.

## Vision

The 21st century is upon us. The post-World War II global architecture is becoming unsustainable. The international security and strategic environment is changing. The centre of gravity of global influence is shifting, and new powers are emerging. India is one of them. Despite the odds, India has withstood internal and external challenges to preserve its democratic and constitutional ethos. Its diversity and pluralism have grown while being firmly rooted in its civilisational heritage. As a result, the states of India are more empowered today than before. More than half its population, larger than the combined size of Europe and the US, is under the age of thirty.

The transformation underway in India will unleash powerful impulses beyond India's borders. This will profoundly impact the world's political, social, cultural and economic systems. As India rises and finds its rightful place on the world stage, its unique identity, traditions and value systems will become critical to global peace and stability.

India is looking ahead to mark the centenary year of its post-independence existence. How India thinks will matter. How India acts will matter even more.

The success of India is crucial to humankind. We seek to understand the domestic and external security challenges facing India and what drives India's strategic calculations. We will ask the right questions without fear or favour and provide our views and insights fearlessly.

We will bring an authentic Indian perspective to understanding the world. We aim to make India's voice heard and count in the international community.

## Aims and objectives

NatStrat undertakes research on issues that impact India's security and foreign policy interests with a focus on three areas – geopolitics, national security, technology, and economy. NatStrat's research is objective, impartial and rigorous. It upholds the highest standards of excellence and scrutiny.

NatStrat seeks to reach out to decision-makers, policymakers, practitioners and the strategic community within and outside India. It engages with international counterparts and with institutions and scholars across India.

NatStrat produces a variety of material, including research papers, commentaries, monographs and policy briefs. Its contributors are among the most authoritative and experienced professionals with international repute and acclaim. It also promotes new and fresh perspectives by encouraging young thinkers to write and work for it. As part of its activities, NatStrat hosts seminars, round table discussions, lectures, podcasts and interviews.



# Table of Contents

## Special Feature

<b>The uniqueness of India - Bangladesh relations</b> <i>Pankaj Saran</i>	02
------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

## The Pangs of Birth

<b>Bangladesh: Revisiting March 1971</b> <i>Syed Badrul Absan</i>	07
<b>Genocide 1971: The inexplicable UN silence!</b> <i>Haroon Habib</i>	10
<b>Brutality in the Gandhi Ashram</b> <i>Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir</i>	14
<b>Genocide in East Bengal Regimental Centre, Noakhali</b> <i>Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir</i>	17
<b>Are the Rohingya refugees finally going back?</b> <i>Haroon Habib</i>	20
<b>Bangladesh in the Election Year</b> <i>Shantanu Mukbarji</i>	23
<b>Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh: The enemy within?</b> <i>Shantanu Mukbarji</i>	25

## India and Bangladesh

<b>The Need for Japanese Investment in Bangladesh and North East India</b> <i>Swadesh Roy</i>	30
<b>Bangladesh's New Indo-Pacific Strategy: Balancing the US and China?</b> <i>Team NatStrat</i>	33
<b>India-Bangladesh: Carving a New Destiny for South Asia</b> <i>Sreeradha Datta</i>	36



# Special Feature

# THE UNIQUENESS OF INDIA - BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Pankaj Saran



India-Bangladesh relations are unique for many reasons. They are a summation of a common history, geography and culture that both countries share. These factors weigh heavily on the relationship, sometimes reinforcing the relationship and sometimes fracturing it. We have lived through both realities. But at the end of every cycle of the good times and the bad times, the ultimate truth stares us in the face - we have to live together and manage our relations on our own. This calls for maturity and statesmanship on both sides and acceptance of the reality that sovereignty may not be as absolute as we may like to believe. This does not mean that political borders are not sacrosanct or territorial integrity or the principles of the UN Charter negotiable.

**The security and development interests of India and Bangladesh intersect at more levels than can be imagined. Developments inside one country affect the other. There are overlapping opportunities and**

**challenges which are a living reality. To that extent, the sovereign interests of both nations need an element of accommodation and adjustment. This may not be palatable to purists and nationalists on either side but is an inescapable fact.**

I have lived in Bangladesh and worked on India-Bangladesh relations for a large part of my career. I have seen the swings in the relationship, and how the fate of our countries is interlinked.

Today, more than fifty years after the liberation of Bangladesh, a new generation of Bangladeshis is shaping the destiny of their country. At one level, this is good because it helps the country to develop its own identity and discover its true genius after the successive traumas the region suffered starting from the partition on Bengal in 1905. The emergence of a new Bangladesh is visible in the towns and villages of



Bangladesh. New institutions have been built to govern the country and regulate its economic activity. A young Bangladeshi today sees herself much more than just a descendant of Pakistan or of British India.

Yet, the battle for identity is far from over. It pervades every walk of life, whether it is politics, culture or social norms and behaviour. Even symbols of nationhood are susceptible to alternate interpretations and historical biases. Some continue to question the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation even today. At one level, everything is up for debate, and no issue seems to be settled. How much of Bangladesh is rooted in its linguistic identity and how much of it in its Islamic identity is a question that still looms, and generates different responses.

Bangladesh is land and resource stressed. Its population in 1971 was about seven crore. Today it is estimated to be close to seventeen crore, most of whom are below the age of thirty. For the sake of comparison, this is higher than the population of Russia. Climate change is leading to shrinking of the coastline, greater salinity and greater susceptibility to natural disasters. All of this poses a threat to livelihood and well-being. The influx of 1.2 million Rohingyas from Arakan is the latest blow to Bangladesh's fragile ecosystem. Despite these challenges the country has done remarkably well over the years, confounding all those who gave Bangladesh little chance to succeed.

Based on strictly empirical data, it can be said that the rise of Bangladesh in the last fifteen years has coincided with the presence of a political leadership that chose to move fast with India, and that good relations with India have been good for Bangladesh. This has been triggered by a combination of major and sustained initiatives in the areas of economic integration, connectivity, trade, infrastructure and people to people links. Underpinning this has been a strategic consensus that peace and security inside Bangladesh not only contributes to positive externalities across the border but is also good for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh over this period went back to the basic contract that led to its emergence as a free nation, based on the principles that informed its liberation and which inspired those who fought for the idea of Bangladesh. Continuity in Delhi's policies towards Bangladesh over two successive and very different governments, on the other hand, is also a unique example of domestic consensus in India on a key foreign policy issue.

There is no running away from the fact that India has been closely associated with Bangladesh's political history. Nor from the fact that developments inside Bangladesh affect the most vulnerable regions of India and in general, India's core security interests. It is only India and Bangladesh, and not any third party, proximate or distant, who can manage this complex interplay of forces and arrive at a modus vivendi on how to live alongside each other. That is the basis for ensuring stability in the sub-region.

Bangladesh is an abiding priority for India. It never leaves the radar of Indian foreign and security policy. In contrast, the attention of the rest of the world on Bangladesh is fitful and sporadic, and not always helpful. Bangladesh is of much less consequence for major powers, except as a plaything on the larger global canvass. As the time for elections approaches, Bangladesh is again beginning to attract attention.

Bangladeshis revel in politics, as do all South Asians. The people of Bangladesh should be allowed to vote and decide their fate without outside interference, coercion, threat or influence. The choice of the system of governance is one only the people of Bangladesh have the right to make. Democracy can neither be exported nor thrust from outside. It has a way of finding its own roots and following the genius of its people.

For the sake of our two peoples, we should hope that the political class and other pillars of Bangladeshi society will continue to move forward towards greater economic integration and stronger ties with India keeping each other's interests in mind. Recent history has shown this is possible and doable. There is no reason why these benefits can not only be persevered but also be built upon.



## Pankaj Saran

Pankaj Saran is a former diplomat with forty years of experience in foreign, strategic and national security affairs. He has served in key positions within the Government of India in the Prime Minister's Office, the National Security Council Secretariat, Ministry of External Affairs and in Indian Missions abroad. He has served as India's Ambassador to Russia and India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh, and as Head of the Northern Division in the Ministry of External Affairs dealing with Nepal and Bhutan.

He has served in different capacities in the Prime Minister's Office contributing to decision-making at the highest levels in a diverse range of sectors, including foreign affairs and national security. From 2018 to 2021, he served as the Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Affairs under Prime Minister Narendra Modi dealing with regional and global strategy formulation, including maritime security and Arctic affairs, neighbourhood policies and technology and economic security.

Pankaj Saran is presently Convenor of NatStrat and a commentator on security and strategic issues and a Distinguished Fellow of the National Maritime Foundation.

# The pangs of birth



# BANGLADESH: REVISITING MARCH 1971

Syed Badrul Ahsan



Minutes into 26 March 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh:

**This may be my last message. From today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh, wherever you are and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved.**

On the morning of 26 March, some hours after the Pakistan Army had arrested Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman following his declaration of Bangladesh's independence, senior generals of the army were seen to be in a celebratory mood in the Dhaka cantonment. Brigadier Abdul Rahman Siddiqi, chief of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and press advisor to General Yahya Khan, President of

Pakistan and Chief Martial Law Administrator, has recorded the atmosphere prevailing in the cantonment even as the military continued to murder Bengalis across Dhaka.

**Here is his report in his book, *East Pakistan: The Endgame: An Onlooker's Journal 1969-1971*.**

“The first person I ran into was General Umar. He could not have looked happier. I saluted him. He embraced me and said that he was glad to see me. Generals Hamid and Tikka were breakfasting in the adjoining dining room . . . Hamid entered the drawing room. He looked completely relaxed after a satisfying breakfast. Behind him was Tikka . . . (who) asked me if I had had my breakfast. ‘Yes, sir, thanks,’ I said.

‘All right,’ he said, pointing to some oranges on a plate, ‘have some of these. They are fresh from West Pakistan.’”

Across Dhaka, the Pakistan Army had already attacked the university and its residential Jagannath Hall and Iqbal Hall. The philosopher G.C. Dev had already been killed, along with some other academics. Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta shot but barely alive, struggled for breath and would die within days.

On Elephant Road, Commander Moazzam Hossain, who had been accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, was murdered by the army at his residence.

The Central Shaheed Minar was reduced to rubble, and students were killed at Jagannath Hall. Professor Nurul Ula captured on video, from his room at quite a distance, long-range images of students being shot by the soldiers. Rickshaw pullers died on their vehicles, pumped by bullets. The orgy of killing, which had begun late on 25 March, continued apace.

General Yahya Khan and his team were back in Rawalpindi, having stealthily flown out of Dhaka the previous evening and without calling a formal end to the negotiations the junta had been having with Bangabandhu and the Awami League. As fire, resulting from an army assault, consumed the offices of the pro-Awami League newspaper *The People* in the early minutes of what would degenerate into genocide, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto watched it all from his suite in Hotel Intercontinental.

**In the cantonment, the mood among the officers was one of battlefield triumph. In the outside world, not a word of the atrocities being perpetrated in Dhaka went out. Away from occupied Bangladesh, the expectation was that General Yahya Khan's radio broadcast, scheduled for the evening, would relate to a transfer of power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.**

That did not happen, as circumstances would show. As Siddiqi notes, Yahya Khan spoke over the radio at 7:15 pm. The generals in the cantonment were happy with what the junta leader had to say. Besides, Siddiqi particularly notes the cheerful way in which Roedad Khan, at the time, information secretary in the central government of Pakistan, received Yahya's speech:

“Roedad's face beamed as the president denounced Mujib as a ‘traitor’ and declared that the man ‘would not go unpunished’. ‘Yar iman taza hogia (my faith stands revived)’, he said.”

Ironically, in the years since the collapse of Pakistan in Bangladesh, Roedad Khan has been singing a different tune on Pakistani television. Yahya Khan, he has said more than once, should have gone for a

political solution to the crisis. He has never contradicted Brigadier Siddiqi's comments regarding his demeanour on 26 March 1971.

And then there is Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, who had been informed by Tikka Khan the previous day: “Khadim, it is tonight”. ‘It’ was of course, the launch of the genocide under the euphemistic term ‘Operation Searchlight’. Raja, whose book *A Stranger in My Own Country: East Pakistan 1969-1971* is a posthumous publication (Raja died in 1999), records the following:

“I was instructed to put Operation Searchlight into action on the night between 25 and 26 March 1971. The ‘go ahead’ signal was given soon after midday on 25 March. This was a momentous decision, and I was very sad for the country. The supreme authority had decided to plunge the country into civil strife; the end result was a foregone conclusion.”

## He goes on to write:

**The President had apparently decided to dump East Pakistan and let it go its own way. He seemed to be concerned about his personal safety only. Therefore, he left Dhaka under some sort of a cover plan at about 7 pm on 25 March, which fooled nobody except, probably, himself.**

A good number of Pakistani military officers active in occupied Bangladesh have, over the decades, come forth with their individual accounts of the crisis in the aftermath of the military action in a soon-to-be independent country.

Brigadier Siddiq Salik, stationed as the Pakistan army's public relations officer in occupied Bangladesh throughout the war, writes of 26 March 1971 in his work *Witness to Surrender*:

**The gates of hell had been cast open. When the first shot had been fired, ‘the voice of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman came faintly through on a wavelength close to that of the official Pakistan**

**Radio. In what must have been, and sounded like a pre-recorded message, the Sheikh proclaimed East Pakistan to be the People's Republic of Bangladesh.**

Salik refers here to a report by the British journalist David Loshak.

In the morning on 26 March, the army escorted Z.A. Bhutto to Tejgaon airport and put him on a flight to Karachi. Arriving in the city, a happy Bhutto made what surely was the understatement of the year.

“Thank God, Pakistan has been saved,” he told waiting newsmen.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was lodged at Adamjee College before being clandestinely flown to (West) Pakistan and placed in solitary confinement in a secret location.

His party colleagues --- Tajuddin Ahmad and others

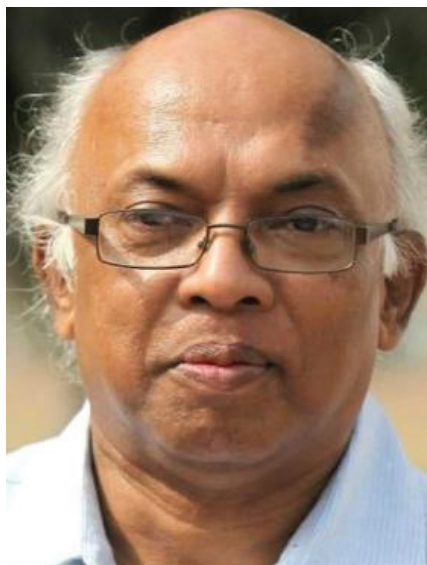
--- made their way out of Dhaka and headed for the border with India. In less than a month, a Bengali government would be formed, and a guerrilla army, the Mukti Bahini, would be put in place to battle the Pakistan occupation army.

Tens of thousands of Bengalis --- students, academics, soldiers, lawyers, medical personnel, artists, political leaders and workers, peasants, civil servants, journalists, and lawyers --- would make their way to Mujibnagar to wage war for liberty.

Postscript:

In his acclaimed work, Ayub Khan: Pakistan's First Military Ruler, Altaf Gauhar notes:

“The struggle of the Bengalis for greater freedom evoked (a) spontaneous response from the smaller provinces of West Pakistan, which were groaning under the yoke of Punjabi and Pathan domination. Toward the end, Ayub came to the dismal conclusion that there was nothing to hold the country together except the fear of the Hindus. The best thing, he thought, was to ‘let East Pakistan go’ and give the other provinces the maximum autonomy they wanted.”



## Syed Badrul Ahsan

Syed Badrul Ahsan is a Bangladeshi political commentator and columnist for publications in Bangladesh, India and Great Britain with almost four decades of experience. He is a member of the Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) and has been part of the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA). He has also served as Minister (Press) at the Bangladesh High Commission, London, and is associated with the Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICWS) in London.

Ahsan has authored five books and currently divides his time between Dhaka and London.

# GENOCIDE 1971: THE INEXPLICABLE UN SILENCE!

Haroon Habib



While the United Nations (UN) has remained silent over one of the major atrocities the world has encountered in the past century, Bangladesh, the victim nation, observes March 25 every year as National Genocide Day in remembrance of the millions who were butchered and raped in 1971. The UN has recognized over a century-old Armenian genocide, and also the Bosnian, Cambodian and Rwandan genocides, but not the Bengali genocide, even though the massacre of civilians and mass-rape, perpetrated by the marauding Pakistani army and their local militia groups, occurred with the sole intention of suppressing and exterminating the population whose political, social and cultural rights were suppressed during the Pakistani era.

Recognizing the intensity of the terror, the then UN Secretary General U Thant has commented on June 3, 1971, in a letter to the UN Security Council that “The happenings in East Pakistan constitute one of the most tragic episodes in human history. Of course, it is for future historians to gather facts and make their own evaluations, but it has been a very terrible blot on a page of human history.”

**The ‘forgotten genocide’ began on the intervening night of March 25-26, 1971, when the Pakistan Army, some**

**18,000 troops aided by tanks, jet fighters, combat helicopters and several thousand paramilitary forces swarmed the city of Dhaka. Code-named ‘Operation Searchlight’, it began with the clear genocidal intent to silence the Bengali uprising for democratic rights under the leadership of Bengali nationalist leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose Awami League party secured the mandate to rule Pakistan in its first-ever general elections held in December 1970.**

Death squads roamed the streets of Dhaka, killing thousands, according to an eyewitness report filed by noted British journalist Simon Dring. He managed to hide as the military forcibly expelled all foreign journalists from the city before the cruelty began.

Ordered by military president General (Gen.) Yahya Khan, the genocide was commanded by several generals led Gen. Tikka Khan, who had vowed to “reduce the majority to a minority ...” While speaking with a group of journalists in western Jessore, Gen. Tikka had said, "Pehle inko Mussalman karo" (First,



make them Muslim). His remarks show that in the highest echelons of the Pakistani Armed Forces the Bengalis were perceived as being “not true Muslims.”

From March 25, 1971, the brutal military aggression continued for more than eight months. Not in Dhaka and other cities alone, the army spread its brutal wings in the villages as quickly as they could. In Chuknagar of Khulna’s Dhumuria, it exterminated an estimated 10,000 people in broad daylight alone. The victims were the majority Hindus, many Muslims, children and women; they were preparing to cross the border into India.

**In recent years, two leading international bodies – the US-based Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and the Genocide Watch – have come up with strong observations detailing the atrocities and demanding recognition by the United Nations of the heinous crimes. A bill was also placed in the US Congress seeking its recognition of the 1971 genocide.**

The premier genocide study center said: “Given the lack of a broad international recognition, the Lemkin Institute calls upon the international community, including the United Nations, to urgently recognize the Bengali genocide as a way to pay tribute to the victims and to hold perpetrators accountable.” The Genocide Watch concludes: “Throughout the nine months of their anti-independence occupation of East Pakistan, the Pakistani Military Forces persecuted, tortured and murdered representatives of Bengali culture and identity including poets, musicians, journalists, physicians, scientists, writers, film makers... These crimes constituted the crimes against humanity”.

Even belated, the public positions of the two global genocide study groups are welcoming because the victims – all unarmed civilians – who fell prey to the brutalities seeking democratic rights but got bullets and bayonets in return. And the world body is maintaining an inexplicable silence over the genocide!

**The mass murder and mass rape in 1971 are well-planned, and, therefore, genocide under the purview of the**

**UN genocide convention of 1948. The barbarity is well-covered by international media as researchers described the massacre as one of the major human slaughters in the post Second World War-era, when an estimated three million people were killed and up to 400,000 Bengali women were raped. The atrocities also drove ten million terrified people to flee their homes to the bordering Indian states.**

The terror displaced a further 30 million people within the territory. Unfortunately, no international action was taken in the past half a century against the perpetrators of these crimes against humanity, and nor did the UN officially recognize the crime.

Like that of other international media, Time magazine had provided details of the massacres on August 2, 1971. It quoted a senior US diplomat stationed in Dhaka as saying, “it is the most incredible, calculated thing since the days of the Nazis in Poland”. Noted American political scientist and professor R J Rummel had said: “These ‘willing executioners’ were fueled by an abiding anti-Bengali racism, especially against the Hindu minority. ‘Bengalis were often compared with monkeys and chicken .... And the soldiers were free to kill at will.’”

Most studies paralleled the Bengali massacre by the Pakistani Army with the genocide of Christian Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, Japanese rampages in China and the Nazi genocides in Europe during World War Two. The intent of the killers was clear. “Kill three million of them, and the rest will eat out of our hands”, noted researcher Robert Pyne quoted military president Gen. Yahya Khan, while Gen Tikka Khan had said, “I want the land and not the people.”

In 1981, a report of an international body had stated: “Among the genocides of human history, the highest number of people killed in lower span of time is in Bangladesh in 1971.”

**The Pakistani Army and their local cohorts conducted genocidal rape, torturing thousands of Bengali**

women. These rapes led to thousands of pregnancies, births, abortions, even suicides. Rape was conducted in a systematic manner with the aim to change the race of the Bengalis.

R J Rummel had written: the Pakistani Army looked upon the Bengali Muslims as "subhuman" and that the Hindus were "as Jews to the Nazis, scum and vermin that best be exterminated". This racism was then expressed in that the Bengalis, being inferior, must have their gene pool "fixed" through forcible impregnation.

Noted researcher Adam Jones had said one of the reasons for the mass rapes was to undermine Bengali society. The International Commission of Jurists concluded that the atrocities carried out by the Pakistan Armed Forces "were part of a deliberate policy...". The highly-regarded Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand has said: The rapes were so systematic and pervasive that they had to be conscious Army policy, "planned by the West Pakistanis in a deliberate effort to create a new race" or to dilute Bengali nationalism". Amita Malik, reporting from Bangladesh following the Pakistan's historic surrender in Dhaka on December 16, 1971, quoted one West Pakistani soldier as saying: "We are going, but leaving our seed behind".

The new-born Bangladesh faced a major problem with the high number of unwanted pregnancies. The Centre for Reproductive Law and Policy gave the number of 250,000 war babies. Most victims also contracted sexual infections, many suffered from feelings of intense shame and humiliation or committed suicide. Dr. Geoffrey Davis, an Australian abortion specialist who worked for the programme of rape victims, estimated that there had been about 5,000 cases of self-induced abortions.

It is also said that Pakistani officers not only allowed their men to rape but enslaved women. Acclaimed researcher Susan Brownmiller wrote: "200,000, 300,000 or possibly 400,000 women were raped. Eighty percent of the raped women were Moslems, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindu and Christian women were not exempt .... The Pakistanis, in their failed attempt of Islamization in Bangladesh, adopted this particular cruel and anti human approach of cleansing the followers of particular faith."

In an interview in 1972, Indira Gandhi, then the Indian prime minister, justified the use of country's military intervention in aid of the Bengali freedom fighters, saying, "Shall we sit and watch their women get raped?" The events were discussed extensively in the British House of Commons as John Stonehouse, Member of Parliament (MP), proposed a motion supported by 200 MPs condemning the atrocities.

According to the confession of a Pakistani soldier, one of the 93,000 prisoners of war who returned home safe after India, Bangladesh and Pakistan signed the 1974 treaty: "We were told to kill the Hindus and Kafirs." The Guinness Book of Records lists the Bangladesh Genocide as one of the top five genocides in the 20th century. Anthony Mascarenhas, a courageous Pakistani journalist, gave a graphic picture of the genocide committed by the country's army in London's Sunday Times on June 13, 1971.

However, Pakistanis were not allowed to know about the tragedy that was unfolding in the former eastern wing of the state. The poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others who knew were humiliated and imprisoned.

Jalladkhana of Dhaka's Mirpur, one of the scores of slaughter-houses across Bangladesh, still bears the marks of the violence that took place in 1971. The countless names collected from various such locations across the country written on the gravestone-like pillars in the triangular courtyard gives disturbing proof of the extent of the massacre committed. "Every mass grave is an ocean of blood and tears," said Dr M.A. Hasan, Convener of the War Crimes Facts Finding Committee. "The killing was not limited in Dhaka but spread all over. Not even infants and the elderly were spared. In some cases, the victims were dumped by the dozen in a 15-20 foot area with mutilated bodies. Most marshy land, drains and canals in Mirpur were full of bodies", said Hasan.

Scores of noted secular intellectuals were murdered and dumped at docksides in Dhaka. Strikingly similar and equally hellish scenes are described in the case-studies of genocide in Armenia and the Nanjing Massacre of 1937. "For month after month in all the regions of East Pakistan the massacres went on," writes Robert Payne, the acclaimed author and researcher.

Although Pakistan has expressed "regret" over the "excesses" committed in 1971, they have always denied the allegations of genocide. But its position does not have many takers.

The UN which has declared 9th December as International Genocide Day, has not provided rational reasons for its continued failure to recognize the Bengali genocide.

An excuse given by certain quarters is the Bangladesh genocide took place in the context of the then US-Soviet Cold War, when Washington sided with Pakistan while Moscow supported India and the creation of Bangladesh. But one must admit that recognition of a genocide is not political, but a question of crimes against humanity.

The fight for humanity is to enrich human civilization, and therefore, the recognition of the 1971 genocide is not merely a demand, a formality or revenge but a loud pronouncement of the conviction that no such crimes against humanity should happen again. It is a struggle to awaken consciousness across the world and deter such heinous crimes from repeating elsewhere.



## Haroon Habib

Haroon Habib is a leading writer, journalist, columnist and researcher who participated in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as a civilian guerrilla fighter as well as a correspondent. He writes regular columns and has authored more than 50 books, mostly in Bengali, the vast majority of which revolve around 1971 and the subsequent years.

# BRUTALITY IN THE GANDHI ASHRAM

Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir



**In 1946, after communal riots broke out in Bihar, Calcutta and Noakhali, Mahatma Gandhi started undertaking extensive tours in the riot torn areas to bring peace and communal harmony. He came to Ramganj in Noakhali on 7 November 1946, after severe communal riots had broken out there.**

One of the worst places of atrocity was Ramganj, where a total of about 132 people were killed. He camped in Chandipur village which was a badly affected area. He stayed in a tin-roofed house called Rajbari for one month. From this house, he started his padajatra to 49 villages and preached the message of peace and harmony among the masses. After one month, he continued his padajatra to other areas of Noakhali for three more months with the same aim. He worked with the communities to build confidence and peace. When Mahatma Gandhi came to Jayag on 29 January 1947, all sections of the local community extended him whole-hearted support.

After about four months, on 2 March 1947, when riots in Bihar broke out, Mahatma Gandhi left Noakhali for Bihar. A camp was set up in Kazirkhil village near Ramganj for coordinating the efforts for peace and harmony in accordance with his instructions. This camp was called Gandhi Camp. The few associates of Gandhiji who worked with him during the four months were Charu Chowdhury, Reddy Palli Satya Narayan, Devendra Narayan Sarkar, Madan Mohan Chattopaddhay, Jibon Krishna Saha, Ajit Kumar Dey, etc. Also among them were Kanu Gandhi (best remembered as Gandhiji's photographer), Abha Gandhi, Mridula Gandhi (widely known as Manuben Gandhi) and Bibi Amtus Salam (a lady from Patiala, Punjab). Before departure, Gandhiji instructed the leaders to continue the peace-building process and bring harmony among the population. Gandhiji's associates continued the process of peace-building and providing relief to the affected families. Later, a permanent camp was set up as proposed by Barrister Hemant Kumar Ghosh in Jayag village where a permanent ashram was set up as this is the place where Gandhiji received tremendous support for his mission. Barrister Hemant Kumar Ghosh decided to donate all his property to Gandhi Ashram, but Gandhiji advised him to use his funds for development of the poor in his area. Barrister

Hemant Kumar Ghosh made a charitable trust in the name of his father (Ambika) and mother (Kaliganga) and named it as Ambika-Kaliganga Charitable Trust which was registered in 1949 after the death of Gandhiji. 2,600 acres of land were donated by Barrister Hemant Kumar Ghosh to this trust which has now been reduced to 23 acres.

**After the imposition of martial law by the Pakistan Army on 7 October 1958, the volunteers of Gandhi Ashram were constantly harassed, several false cases were filed against them and many of them were arrested and sent to jail.**

Attempts were made to force them to leave East Pakistan, but many of the volunteers stuck to the ashram. The properties of the ashram were forcefully taken away by some land-grabbers and anti-social elements. It was almost impossible to continue the activities of the ashram. The team manager of the peace mission, Charu Chowdhury, was detained in jail several times between 1963 and 1971. He was released in December 1971, after the liberation of Bangladesh.

In 1971, after the crackdown by the Pakistan Army, Gandhi Ashram continued its humanitarian activities of helping the poor and victims of atrocities. But fear persisted in the area and the minority communities in the area also became victims of the widespread genocide. At around 11 a.m. on 4 September, the ashram was surrounded by the Pakistan Army and their collaborators. The ruthless Pakistan Army and their collaborators entered the ashram and shot dead the following volunteers and disciples of Gandhi:

1. Devendra Narayan Sarkar: He joined Mahatma Gandhi immediately when he came to Noakhali. He stayed back in the Gandhi Ashram as per Gandhiji's instructions. When the Pakistan Army entered there, he was saying his prayer on the roof of the Gandhi Ashram where he was shot dead.
2. Madan Mohan Chattopaddhay: He was also killed along with Devendra Narayan Sarkar.

In addition, the following disciples of Gandhiji who served the ashram were also killed near the Gandhi Ashram:

1. Jibon Krishna Saha: He joined Gandhiji in the 1946 peace march. He was engaged in development and peace activities in Bamni village under Raipur police station. As the Pakistan Army and their collaborators were looking for him, he went to Sylhet where he was captured and killed.
2. Ajit Kumar Dey: He joined the Liberation War and took part in several operations in the Panchgaon area. It is known that he was killed by the collaborators of the Pakistan Army immediately after liberation.

**The Pakistan Army looted the Gandhi Ashram and took all the valuable assets including doors and windows. They also burnt all the books and historical documents. The ashram lost not only its key volunteers but also all its property, documents and books. A part of the ashram was damaged.**

After independence, Charu Chowdhury started reorganizing the ashram and freed some of the land and properties from the land-grabbers. In 1974, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave instructions to reorganize the Gandhi Ashram and give it a legal identity and the file was processed for approval. It took final shape with the Gazette Notification of the Bangladesh Government on 2 October 1975, where the 'Ambika-Kaliganga Charitable Trust' was renamed as 'Gandhi Ashram Trust (GAT)', which included the property of the Gandhi Camp and Ambika-Kaliganga Charitable Trust. The aim of the ashram was primarily for rural development and human rights.

The ashram was made autonomous and a committee with representatives from both the Bangladeshi and Indian Governments was formed to run the activities of the GAT. The GAT Chairman was Justice Debesh Bhattacharyya; other trustees were Deputy Commissioner of Noakhali, Country Head of State Bank of India in Bangladesh, Principal of Noakhali Government College Bishwaranjan Sen (a Gandhi disciple), Reddy Palli Satya Narayan (a Gandhi disciple) and Charu Chowdhury (a Gandhi disciple and trustee secretary).



## Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir

Lt. Col. (Retd.) Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir is a freedom fighter, recipient of Bir Protik, Swadhinata Padak, Padma Shri, a researcher and author on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. He has authored 63 books and a large number of articles in Bangla and English newspapers and periodicals in Bangladesh and abroad on Liberation War, war crime and genocide committed by Pakistan Army and their collaborators in 1971.

# GENOCIDE IN EAST BENGAL REGIMENTAL CENTRE, NOAKHALI

Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir



The East Bengal Regimental Centre (EBRC) is situated in Chittagong (now Chattogram) Cantonment. It was raised in 1950 in Kurmitola, Dhaka, along with its record office. In December 1953, the EBRC was relocated to Chittagong. This centre is composed of Pakistani and Bengali officers and soldiers.

The situation in the EBRC was tense like in other cantonments of Bangladesh since 7 March 1971 after the clarion call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Race Course ground to resist the occupation forces if they attack the Bengalis. The EBRC was commanded by a Bengali, Brigadier M.R. Majumder, who was heli-lifted to Dhaka (then Dacca) by Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, General Officer Commanding, 14 Division of the Pakistan Army. He was replaced by a Punjabi, Brigadier M.H. Ansari. The Chief Instructor of the EBRC was a Bengali, Lieutenant (Lt.) Colonel (Col.) M.R. Chowdhury.

2,500 Bengali recruits were training at the EBRC at that time. On the night of 25 March, they were fast asleep, oblivious of what lay ahead. At around 11:00 p.m., Quartermaster Captain Enamul Haq, noticed large contingents of soldiers in trucks coming out of the barracks of 20 Baluch Regiment. The convoy passed by his office and stopped in front of the EBRC recruit barracks. As he came out of his office, he saw soldiers dismount the trucks in a hurry. In no time, the soldiers of 20 Baluch Regiment attacked the sentries who were guarding the EBRC Quarter Guard. The sound of rifle fire, mortar, LMG and tanks tore through the night. The chaos continued for hours. The EBRC guards were few in number and could not resist the attack on the ammunition depot for long. The soldiers of 20 Baluch Regiment killed all the guards and took over the armoury.

Simultaneously, another group of soldiers from 20 Baluch Regiment attacked the sleeping recruits, soldiers and family members in their quarters. Most

of them were killed brutally. Lt. Col. M.R. Chowdhury was sleeping on the first floor of the Officer's Mess. He had sent his family to his village home on March 13. The soldiers from 20 Baluch Regiment surrounded and shot and killed him with bayonets. His body along with the dead bodies of seven other soldiers were dragged and quickly buried under a tree next to the 20 Baluch Regiment soldiers' line.

Lt. Col. Chowdhury's constant companion was his Alsatian Jimmy. The dog howled for three days next to his master's grave and eventually was silenced when he was shot and killed by the Pakistani soldiers. Mercy did not have a place even for a faithful dog in those few days of hell.

**The leader of these killings was Lt. Col. A.H. Fatmi, the 20 Baluch Regiment's commander. He was entrusted with the responsibility of killing the sleeping recruits and did so in the most gruesome ways possible. They were beaten and shot to death, burnt alive and blown up by grenades. When the soldiers ran short of bullets, they used bayonets as they went on their killing spree crying out at the same time, "It's taking too long to kill all the Bangalis (Bangali khatm nehi hota)!"**

The scene at the EBRC was terrifying. Some recruits in this melee ran and took shelter in the hills to the western side, adjacent to the EBRC barracks. The fortunate few who witnessed the killing spree lived to tell the stories of that night of horror.

A few recruits in their interviews told me that even the dead bodies of the recruits were torn open with bayonets after the brutal killing. The attacks in the EBRC intensified in the late hours of the night. The Pakistan Army fired rounds from mortars and tanks as a precautionary measure to ensure that none of the Bengali soldiers would survive. Mortar attacks were also carried out on recruits who took shelter in the hills. Those who came down the hills to surrender were surrounded, taken inside the EBRC School, shot and killed with bayonets. There has been no body count of the dead.

**However, it is estimated that more than 1,000 soldiers and recruits of the EBRC were killed between the night of 25 March and noon of 26 March. This was one of the most savage genocides of 1971.**

As the day rolled on, the bodies of the recruits were being dumped into trucks. By then, the Pakistani soldiers had also spread kerosene oil and petrol over the hills and set them on fire. As it was the dry season, the Pakistan Army believed the fire would spread, and any recruit hiding there would eventually surrender or be burnt alive. Added to this, they continued to fire the three-inch mortar and tank shells in the direction of the hills.

A few surviving recruits climbed higher up the hills in search of safety. An unforgettable scene played out at the foot of the hills. One Bengali soldier who hid in the drain adjacent to the EBRC football grounds, suddenly emerged with a sten gun in his hands. He rushed towards the 20 Baluch Regiment soldiers who were relaxing in the football field and kept firing at them. The Pakistani soldiers were taken aback by the courageous act of a single Bengali soldier. Six Pakistani soldiers were killed and about 12 or 13 of them were injured. This brave Bengali soldier continued to shoot at the enemy till he had no more ammunition. By then he was injured and surrounded from all sides and brutally killed. To this day, we do not know who this young soldier was. He was one among the few who could take arms from the ammunition depot the previous night.

**The EBRC massacre is one of the worst committed by the Pakistan Army (20 Baluch Regiment) in 1971. In Operation Searchlight, the troops were tasked with disarming the EBRC troops. But the Pakistanis did not and instead, just killed as many as they could. It was a bloodbath of young and unarmed soldiers who were too young to die at only seventeen or eighteen.**





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# ARE THE ROHINGYA REFUGEES FINALLY GOING BACK?

Haroon Habib



**A somewhat serious move is now underway to repatriate Rohingya refugees to their homeland in Rakhine State, from where the ethnic minority was brutally evicted by Myanmar authorities in 2017. Since then, Bangladesh has hosted over 1.1 million refugees in Cox's Bazar and other places.**

On 5th May 2023, a delegation of 20 Rohingyas led by Bangladesh officials, visited Maungdaw town to see if the environment and conditions in Rakhine State is favourable for repatriation. The visit was the first such occasion for the Rohingyas to see their land from where they were forced to flee as their homes were torched and destroyed in a bid to cleanse the ethnic minority. The delegation visited 15 villages and other infrastructures built for the would-be resettlement. The tour also took them to a transit camp in Maungdaw where the refugees would be housed initially.

The visit was well covered by the Bangladesh media. It has raised a new ray of hope as Myanmar's generals, who have so far shown no mood to take the Rohingyas back, now seem willing under a mediation

plan chalked out by China.

Beijing's role was explained by the Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh, Mr Yao Wen, who said on May 6 that his country has been "unswervingly mediating" between Bangladesh and Myanmar to promote the repatriation of the Rohingyas to their homeland.

Understandably, Dhaka's official mood is supportive of the plan as the refugees have been languishing in camps for six years, and not only taxing Bangladesh economically but also causing social, cultural and security threats. Bangladesh, therefore, wants to go back to lessen its burden and anxiety.

Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Mohammed Mizanur Rahman, who led the delegation, praised the Myanmar authorities, stating: "We have seen the goodwill and willingness in Myanmar to facilitate repatriation. We are hoping that it [repatriation] will be sustainable." However, the high official admitted that the Rohingyas, which has been a long-standing issue, may not be solved overnight. The planned repatriation, according to Mr Rahman, is likely to start by the end of May.

However, the official mood was not reflected by the Rohingyas. Their representatives expressed

disappointment: "We have not found our villages. Everything has changed. The areas are now full of camps," said Abu Sufian, a member of the delegation. Rohingya leaders including Mohammad Selim, also a delegation member, said Rohingyas would not return until they were granted citizenship. The immediate reactions by Rohingyas are negative. But Myanmar officials said their demands would be met in phases.

As per the accord, some Rohingyas will be relocated to the place of their origin, while others to a place nearby. It is learnt that a Myanmar team will soon visit Cox's Bazar to build confidence among the Rohingyas and make them feel assured.

There are varying perceptions over repatriation, with Dhaka and Naypyidaw in agreement to begin under the Chinese brokered plan. While most Rohingyas seemed eager to end their refugee lives, they all want their destroyed homes back, and citizenships and security guaranteed. But a section of the Rohingya leaders said: "We don't want to live in camps in our country."

The Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh due to decades-long institutionalized discrimination, statelessness, and targeted brutality. After lengthy negotiations, Dhaka and Naypyidaw signed an agreement years ago for their return. The first batch of refugees was to be repatriated by 15 November 2018 but that did not happen. In August 2019, another attempt was made by China to send the Rohingyas back but the refugees were reluctant due to their citizenship and security. After a long pause in the repatriation process, a Myanmar delegation visited Bangladesh to start the verification process in person. According to the RRRC, Bangladesh has listed 882,000 Rohingya since the first major influx in August 2017 but the Myanmar authorities recognised only 68,000.

The Myanmar government has made smaller houses in two newly-built model villages for the returnees. However, given the size of the Rohingya families, these houses are too small. Besides, Rohingyas would have to make food arrangements on their own while Myanmar will supply furnaces and firewood for a month. children will be permitted to enrol in a local school and receive medical care at adjacent clinics.

China, which has maintained strategic ties with the internationally isolated junta, now seems serious in mediating between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the Rohingya issue. Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang has reiterated Beijing's offer to mediate in "improving" bilateral ties. This might be seen as

Beijing's attempt to emerge as an effective negotiator in conflicts after successful mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Qin, who met Myanmar's top leadership since the military coup over two years ago, also pledged to support the country in "exploring" a development path with "Myanmar characteristics". He told General Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw that Beijing was also ready to "expand" ties between China, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

According to a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement, Qin told the junta general: "China supports Myanmar improving its relations with Bangladesh, with related issues to be resolved through consultation, adding that China is willing to work with the two countries to expand China-Myanmar-Bangladesh pragmatic cooperation."

In a recent remark, Chinese ambassador in Dhaka, Mr Wen, also insisted: Bangladesh and China "should deepen the strategic partnership" for cooperation and explore new growth points. China and Bangladesh should continue to support each other on issues of core interests, and say "no" to external interference with one voice."

The initial Western response towards the plight of the Rohingyas as well as their seriousness to make the Myanmar generals accountable for 'genocide' have diminished. No concrete steps, except for sanctions on a few generals, are in sight now.

**While the International Criminal Court (ICC) indictment of Russian President Vladimir Putin, including quick issuance of his arrest warrant over alleged Ukraine genocide was too swift, the progress of the Rohingya genocide case filed by Gambia seems too delayed! Gambia, with the backing of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), filed the case in November 2019 accusing the Myanmar authorities of atrocities against the Rohingyas in Rakhine State.**

The West's inaction has probably tempted the Chinese envoy to conclude: "A local friend once told me sincerely that many people provide lip-services,

but only China is actually doing practical things to proceed with the repatriation.”

However, some quarters try to explain that the Chinese-brokered move might have begun in the background of global pressure on Myanmar. Ever since the latest military coup, Myanmar has been in a major civil war spreading across the nation. The junta does not effectively control all parts of the country as rebels intensify their efforts to resist the military regime. They conclude that the changed mindset of the military leadership could thus be suspected as their effort to ease global pressure, instead of really taking all the Rohingyas back.

Also, without Myanmar ensuring a suitable environment for the Rohingyas, it is not practical to believe that the refugees will voluntarily agree to return to the bloody hostility they once experienced. However, even if the possibility of major progress in the ongoing repatriation plan still looks slim, it is evident that some kind of repatriation may take place this time.



## Haroon Habib

Haroon Habib is a leading writer, journalist, columnist and researcher who participated in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as a civilian guerrilla fighter as well as a correspondent. He writes regular columns and has authored more than 50 books, mostly in Bengali, the vast majority of which revolve around 1971 and the subsequent years.

# BANGLADESH IN THE ELECTION YEAR

Shantanu Mukharji



Her opponents exploit any flaw in Hasina's governance in an ongoing campaign to adversely impact her electoral chances. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the chief rival, is alleging that the current economy of Bangladesh is showing signs of a slowdown and may go the Sri Lanka way with no chances of any recovery.

In the same steam, the opposition has made a major issue on Nobel Laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, formerly of Grameen Bank. It may be recalled that forty prominent foreign nationals belonging to different spheres of activity, inserted an advertisement in the influential daily, Washington Post, calling for recognition of Dr Yunus's seminal contribution to Bangladesh and its welfare through microcredit schemes for poverty alleviation. The signatories include former US President Bill Clinton and the erstwhile United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reacted angrily to this campaign and many of her supporters in the academic world have unanimously denounced the international move alleging the state harassment of Dr Yunus. While the Yunus issue may not significantly affect Hasina's election, it might sully the image of Bangladesh in international circles especially among those in the western world who are questioning the neutrality of the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Hasina and her supporters hold Yunus's welfare approach had adverse impacts.

**On the communal front, Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina, continues to grapple with the problems of communal strife where the minorities are intermittently and violently targeted by a section of majority community which include moves to desecrate religious places, usurp minority property, and in some cases, forcible conversions.**

In a recent incident, Ahmadiyya Muslims were attacked by the bigots in Panchagarh, northern Bangladesh. As in the past when the followers of the sect as well as other religious minorities, notably Hindus, have borne the brunt of fanatical fury by radical elements of the majority Muslim section of the country's population, the assault in Panchagarh took place while the community was busy preparing to hold its Salana Jalsa. Two died in the attacks, the conference venue was destroyed and Ahmadiyya homes were looted. The police and other security forces failed to control the violence. Afterwards, the police let the media know that investigations were going on to identify those behind the attacks. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan pointed the finger of blame at the Jamaat-e-Islami and its ally, the

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), for spearheading the violence. However, the BNP responded by blaming the ruling Awami League (AL) for having staged the attack on Ahmadiyyas to malign the BNP. According to columnist Syed Badrul Ahsan, this incident once again exposes the self-gratifying slogan that Bangladesh is a land of communal harmony. Calling it a shame that does not go away, despite the assurances of the nation's Prime Minister that no one will be permitted to destroy communal harmony in the country. The Prime Minister's statement has been given short shrift by those who undermined their own faith by going after the faith of others. It is time for Bangladesh, with all the force and power at its command, to strike back at these elements who have once again torched homes, have presided over the murder of citizens and have brought the state once more to this terrible pass.

Notwithstanding some stray incidents of a communal nature, we should not judge the country's governance in a negative light. Instead, the present dispensation merits commendation where its leadership is making sincere efforts in battling the roots of the communal problem. In this regard, the country's Education Minister, Dr Dipu Moni, must find mention for trying to usher in the scientific temper into the madrassa system of education. In a very recent observation, she has questioned the madrassa leadership for not pursuing science and focusing on namaz and the construction of madrassas. Her statements are a promise for a progressive future in an obvious attempt to contain communal trends in the country. However, such thoughts are required from all progressive and modern leaders. Such ideas will then ensure that Bangladesh surges ahead as a modern

nation. After all, it has successfully completed more than fifty years as an independent country and its founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had envisioned a secular and progressive Bangladesh with no religious discrimination. March is the month of independence for Bangladesh as well as the birth month of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Again, this year being the election year, it is all the more imperative on the part of the Bangladeshi leadership to outline its priorities with communalism and terror threats. Its economy, though on track with strong signs of growth, needs further improvement.

Socially, Bangladesh has forged ahead with numerous successes including remarkable achievements in women emancipation with their representation in almost all fields of activity especially in politics, teaching, banking, science, medicine, policing and other significant areas. In the month of Independence, renewed efforts to uplift the women to newer heights will further refurbish the image of Bangladesh. This will also be an inspiration to other countries in the region particularly in the Islamic world.

Prime Minister Hasina and her team need to take tough measures to neutralize anti-progressive forces as in the election year all eyes are trained towards Bangladesh and its nearly sixteen crore people. On the external front, Bangladesh is maintaining excellent relations with India and other countries and is constantly reaching out to other nations as well with dignity and self-esteem. This momentum needs to be consistently kept up even after the elections.



## Shantanu Mukharji

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# JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI IN BANGLADESH: THE ENEMY WITHIN?

Shantanu Mukharji



**The Bangladesh-based Islamic fundamentalist outfit, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), notorious for its religious intolerance, bigotry and hatred, is again in the spotlight for its revived political activities. Although not known for any electoral activity, it continues to wreak discord and communal tension through inciting inter-faith disharmony.**

A visible revival of activities by the Jamaat was noticed at a massive rally it held in Dhaka on June 10 which drew a huge crowd. The rally was accorded formal permission by the local authorities –a move which surprised many. Some hold the view that there is a tacit understanding between the Awami League (AL)-led government and the JeI, perhaps indicating a political compromise ahead of elections which are due early next year. Some Bangladesh-watchers do

not rule out the possibility of US pressure on the government to allow Jamaat to hold such a rally, and that too with government's express approval. This is indeed unexpected, but experts are also reading it alongside the recent US sanctions on visas to Bangladeshis seeking to visit the US. Either way, the Jamaat stands to gain at least tactically for the time being by securing permission and holding a "successful" rally.

**This development is unwelcome to the progressive and forward-thinking section in Bangladesh, who apprehend any revival of the Jamaat will see a deterioration in the communal atmosphere, especially because of the outfit's tainted reputation for its collaboration with Pakistani occupation forces in**

**1970-71 and for its systematic participation in carrying out killings of intellectuals, Hindus and freedom fighters in run up to the liberation struggle.**

Hence their apprehensions are not totally unfounded. In this context, it is also pertinent to point out that in the past, during the Khaleda Zia led Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regime (1991-1996 and 2001-2006), it had a robust political partnership with the Jamaat-e-Islami. Two of the JeI's important functionaries were given significant portfolios as ministers in the cabinet and they fully utilized their positions to strengthen JeI's grassroots cadres and also enrich its coffers by ensuring huge funding--either through surreptitious means or by securing heavy funding from Middle Eastern countries as well as several Islamic endowments.

Against this backdrop, the re-surfacing of the Jamaat at this critical political juncture merits close scrutiny. The government may have factored all the pros and cons of permitting the Jamaat rally and decided that this is not harming the communal atmosphere or denting party's electoral prospects. On the other hand, if this is not the case, the government and the ruling party cannot escape the blame for reviving the Jamaat and eventually possibly pushing the country towards fundamentalism and religious extremism.

Those who believe this was done under US pressure argue it is consistent with the US policy of keeping the Jamaat and its affiliates over ground, so their activities are visible, thus allowing better oversight. Banning them, in this view, would drive them underground. But the large turnout at the Jamaat rally has made the authorities apprehensive.

According to credible intelligence sources, the Jamaat has seen a threefold rise in the number of its activists: the present figure stands at 6.39 lakh while fifteen years ago, it was barely 2.21 lakh. Also, the number of JeI permanent cadres was 23,863 in 2008 while it has swelled to 73,046 today. These statistics are not only of academic interest; they also indicate the phenomenal growth of this fundamentalist setup in letter and in spirit at a time when there is a global war against rise of fundamentalism and also of Islamic terror.

Further, the same credible intelligence reports also

give out the Jamaat's strategy for the upcoming national election and more importantly, its funding. These figures are processed on the basis of information collected from the party's top secret classified documents, interrogation of leading Jamaat leaders, and even technology-based interceptions carried out during communication amongst party leaders. A leading daily of Bangladesh claims to be in possession of such vital information made available from intelligence sources. Also, the documents procured from the Jamaat leaders indicate a sharp rise in recruitment of women cadres, a fact which cannot be ignored.

**Significantly, permission for the June 10 Jamaat rally came after 10 years. Many observers felt it defied all logical explanation: despite attempts by many ministers in the government to defend the government's decision to allow the rally to take place, this has given a fresh lease of life to the Jamaatis.**

Earlier, in the aftermath of getting de-registered as a political party by the Bangladesh Government in 2013, the JeI had tried to stage a comeback by renaming itself first as the Bangladesh Development Party (BDP), and subsequently as Amar Bangladesh Party (ABP). Nonetheless, they were denied recognition as despite the name change, the cadres remained the same, keeping the ideology and tenets of religious fundamentalism intact. However, the party has grown in leaps and bounds in the last fifteen years and is raring to flex its muscles to occupy a political space in pursuit of its communal agenda. It is also thought to have adopted an effective strategy of increasing its voters in constituencies where it has a strong base.

In the meantime, authoritative sources reveal that the JeI has been trying to spread its activities abroad by enlisting fresh members and launching a fund-raising drive in order to proliferate its activities overseas. Also, hardcore JeI cadres originating from Bangladesh and settled abroad, are engaged in hectic political lobbying with politicians of significance, in the West, particularly in EU countries.



More specifically, Jamaat-e-Islami's senior leaders abroad have canvassed British parliamentarians, and in pursuit of this they are actively collaborating with BNP fugitive Tarique Rahman and other BNP leaders who are suspected of being associated with some western intelligence and security agencies.

Judging by the recent events related to the Jamaat, especially in light of the upcoming elections, the Intelligence and Counter Terror bodies in Bangladesh should consider harnessing their resources more vigorously to keep a tab on any possible nexus with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and others trying to promote the Jamaat's pursuit of a course of action obviously detrimental to the geopolitical and security interests of not only Bangladesh, but India as well and the immediate neighbourhood. Pakistan's interests are well known--extending all out support to the Jamaat

because of a long partnership which has existed since the creation of Pakistan. Pakistan's destructive role in 1971 does not require any elaboration and its open opposition to the trial and subsequent hanging of Jamaat war criminals is in the public domain. But for Sheikh Hasina's strong resolve and determination, the Jamaat convicts would have had an easy escape.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is in power and hopes to remain so in the near future. Hence, any move by the Jamaat to raise its head must be nipped in the bud. Let there be no illusions that the fundamentalists or anti-India forces have slackened.

At the same time, it is hoped that the recently held Jamaat rally or the intelligence leaked statistics of the Jamaat are not getting the better of progressive and liberal forces. This onerous task lies squarely upon Prime Minister Hasina, her party and Bangladesh's liberals.



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# India and Bangladesh



# THE NEED FOR JAPANESE INVESTMENT IN BANGLADESH AND NORTH EAST INDIA

Swadesh Roy



In today's stable environment, India's North-East oil pipeline and the electricity line have become important aspects of Bangladesh's rapidly growing economy. However, 10-12 years ago, the threat of violence from terrorist or separatist groups made the construction of the oil pipeline problematic because an attack on an oil pipeline would have disastrous consequences. Today, the gas pipeline from North-East India to Bangladesh is a reality, and terrorism and separatism are things of the past.

The Bangladeshi government has deported North-East Indian separatists who had been in Bangladesh for a long time. Furthermore, in the last ten years, there have been some tremendous changes in North-East India. Radical developments have taken place in road, rail, and air connectivity development. This has strengthened cultural and linguistic connections in North-East India and made interactions between different linguistic and cultural ethnic groups easier. These developments have created a new generation with an "India - one nation," mindset, leaving separatist mentalities behind.

Alongside, development has created many job sectors in North-East India, once an area of high unemployment.

**The younger generation is getting more jobs in North-East India, as well as in other parts of India. The positive impact of jobs and development has resulted in a significant shift in people's lifestyles.**

In Assam, the largest province in North-East India with a population of 30 million, at least 6-8 million people now use smartphones, a comparative rarity in the capital city of Guwahati a decade ago.

Moreover, North-East India is no longer a separatist or terrorist hotspot, and the chances of it recurring in that region are small. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has significantly improved its road connectivity over the

last 14 years, facilitating easier connections with most of the border area of North-East India. Now is the time for entrepreneurs, local stakeholders and the two country's governments to utilize this opportunity. There is considerable scope to make medical cities, education cities, tech cities, and garment cities in the border area. There is also a market for Bangladeshi garments in North-East India.

Another opportunity is to make use of Cox's Bazar Sea Beach in Bangladesh. North-East India has 17 airports, and "budget air" operations are increasing daily. Budget air is used for people's movement and has already been used to carry goods to other parts of India, and to other countries. Bangladeshi and Indian entrepreneurs should consider starting budget airlines gradually from North-East India to Cox's Bazar, which can be a new business avenue for both countries. It is more than a probability that budget air will be one of the leading mediums of connectivity in the future.

The landlocked region of North-East India has always needed port facilities and Bangladesh's ports have been a major help in this regard. The only other nearby port is Sittwe port of Myanmar which may be one of the closest seaports for North-East India. North-East India has already started to use Chittagong port and carry their goods by road to Tripura and other states. Due to the Padma Bridge, North-East India will also get the facilities of Bangladesh's Mongla and Payra ports. Finally, North-East India will get a large port facility from Bangladesh after the completion of the Matarbari Deep Seaport in Chittagong, which is now under construction by Japan, and the operation starting time is in 2027. It will be a game changer for the economy of this region.

**As these seaports of Bangladesh are in the Bay of Bengal, a peaceful Bay of Bengal is in the obvious interest of Bangladesh and North-East India. But it is seen as likely that the possibility of the next power game will happen in the sea rather than on land. And that power conflict is growing because now the world is a "Thucydides trap."**

In such a situation, a new power rises, and the existing

old power falls in conflict with the new power. Before the Second World War, in most cases, two powers engaged in war, and the old power lost; but in the Second World War the old power made an alliance and ultimately won. So, the traditional concept of the "Thucydides' Trap" did not come true. Now, a new power is rising in an Asian country. Before the new power flourished, the old had already made a QUAD alliance. On the other hand, the new power's strategy is different now. Like in the past, it is somewhat less likely to involve a military war by the new power; they are more interested more in creating economic and political emperors.

Even against the new growing power in Asia, Japan is the vital creator of the QUAD. And the QUAD is not only a military ally but also an economic ally. One of its many primary duties is peace in the Pacific Ocean. Thinking of a tranquil Bay of Bengal is unrealistic without a peaceful Indo-Pacific Ocean. On this point, the position of Bangladesh is clear. As a chief guest, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh clearly expressed Bangladesh's position in a seminar held on 10th November 2019 in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Regarding the Indian Ocean, she said, "About one-third (around 35 percent) of the global population surrounds the Indian Ocean. So, we want a peaceful Indian Ocean Region."

The QUAD is active in accommodating more countries. QUAD members are increasing their military budgets to ensure a peaceful Indo-Pacific region, but it will be more realistic if the present QUAD can extend its members and create a situation that will make China rational regarding the South China Sea and the Pacific. Then the Indo-Pacific zone will be peaceful, and that will make a peaceful Bay of Bengal region.

**In the current global political scenario, Japan is a major player in Asia in promoting peace and stability. Additionally, Japan is a trusted friend of both Bangladesh and India. From the birth of Bangladesh, Japan has been the leading development partner of this country. And, similarly, India too.**

When India allows only Japan as a foreign country to invest in a sensitive area sandwiched by the three

countries of the Indian North-East region, then there is no need to reiterate how high the trust is between Japan and India. So, in the future, more investment from Japan will be more helpful for developing the partnership between North-East India and Bangladesh.

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that any sustainable relationship depends on the mindset of the people. This mindset has to be developed by politicians, state policies, social forums, and by the mainstream media of North East India and Bangladesh. Despite some reverses in the last 10 years, India has built up an infrastructure for the economy that can help to make a sustainable partnership with Bangladesh.

Alongside, however, attitudes and perceptions about Bangladesh among the people of North-East India must transform too. Many still see Bangladesh only in terms of being a Muslim country. On the other hand, some anti-Indian sentiments in Bangladesh need to be addressed. Both countries must work to counter these shadows on the relationship to ensure a peaceful coexistence that will permanently reach the hearts of the people. Improving connectivity will help to remove all the remaining barriers and create a good environment for the involvement of Japan's investment.



## Swadesh Roy

Swadesh Roy is a journalist, writer, and editor, recognized with the prestigious Ekushey Padak award for his contributions at the highest state level. He is the founder and editor of Sarakhon, Media in Bangladesh, and also serves as the Chairman of Look Asia, a think-tank.

# BANGLADESH'S NEW INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY: BALANCING THE US AND CHINA?



On 24th April 2023, Bangladesh officially and finally released, after years of hesitancy and unwillingness to antagonise China, its Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO), a 15-point strategy for a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Releasing the document, Bangladeshi State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Md Shahriar Alam stated that the Indo-Pacific can be crucial for Bangladesh's long-term resilience and prosperity. He said "The Indo-Pacific area's collective share in global GDP, preponderance in international trade, enhanced climate action and growing technological dynamism can be key determinants for ensuring Bangladesh's long-term resilience and prosperity."

Notwithstanding these lofty principles, the fact is that the document was deliberately released to create the atmosphere for Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's three-nation tour to Japan, USA and the UK.

NatStrat looked at the "Indo-Pacific Outlook of Bangladesh". These are the main takeaways:

## Timing

Clearly timed with the visit of Prime Minister Hasina to ease tensions with the West, buy some goodwill, and in the process distance itself from China.

## Guiding Principles

1. Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's foreign policy dictum 'Friendship towards all, malice towards none'.
2. Constitutional mandate on the conduct of international relations based on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, political independence, non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful settlement of international disputes; and striving for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament.

3. Adherence to the relevant UN treaties and international conventions, as applicable, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.
4. Constructive regional and international cooperation for sustainable development, international peace and security, humanitarian action, and fundamental rights and freedoms.

## Objectives

1. Strengthen partnerships, promoting dialogue, maintaining maritime safety and security, combating transnational organised crime, promoting sustainable development, building resilient value chains, and enhancing health security. Due to Bangladesh's geographical peculiarities and limitations, there is a strong emphasis on resources, security and climate change.
2. Strengthen partnerships to ensure peace, prosperity, security and stability for all in the Indo-Pacific by promoting dialogue and understanding. The strategy underscores the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea. It will aid in maintaining maritime safety and security by responding to emergencies at sea, conducting search and rescue operations, and upholding navigation and overflight rights.
3. Support to the regional and international efforts in the Indo-Pacific to combat transnational organised crime. This will be realised through a combination of normative and practical actions.
4. Promotion of peace and stability by laying the groundwork for an open, transparent, rules-based multilateral system for equitable and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific and beyond through inclusive economic growth, right to development and shared prosperity for all.
5. Building resilient global value chains, leveraging the domestic agriculture, manufacturing and service sectors, which will better manage future crises and disruptions as well as promote an uninterrupted flow of commerce in the Indo-Pacific.
6. Enhancement of health security by

collaborating and coordinating a resource to future pandemics. Ensuring global access to vaccines, diagnostics and medical facilities and assistance is also required.

## On India

The strategy hints at India while referring to “collaboration with sub regional partners and relevant organisations”. It could be interpreted to include BIMSTEC, SAARC and the Colombo Security Conclave. The word “inclusive” in Bangladesh's aspiration for the Indo-Pacific resonates with India's own Indo-Pacific vision. Here, inclusive also fully addresses China's sensitivities.

## What is missing

The strategy steers clear of any direct references to military competition or geopolitical rivalries. Focus is kept on non-traditional or sub-conventional security aspects. No reference to ASEAN and its centrality in the Indo-Pacific region.

## Conclusion

**The areas of priority listed in the Outlook are a combination of domestic and international imperatives. The document seeks to serve internal political objectives while also balancing external interests. It is a diplomatic sleight of hand. It is meant to appease the US and the West by appearing to be a part of the Indo-Pacific strategy, and yet be broad and ambiguous enough not to offend the Chinese. While this is a noble effort at distancing Bangladesh from geopolitical rivalry between the two major powers, it is unlikely to satisfy either, and certainly not the US.**

With this document, Prime Minister Hasina's government has however made a much needed overture to the US, but it needs to do a lot more.



It is in Bangladesh's interest that it does not allow China to use its economic and military muscle to dominate and influence Bangladesh's hard won freedom and independent foreign policy. It needs reminding that China, together with its proxy state, Pakistan, had actively blocked and opposed the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971.

China is no friend of Bangladesh. It is using Bangladesh as a pawn in a larger strategic game. Bangladesh's biggest export market for its largest export products, readymade garments, is the US and EU.

# INDIA-BANGLADESH: CARVING A NEW DESTINY FOR SOUTH ASIA

Sreeradha Datta



India and Bangladesh have together breached ceilings that were considered impregnable in South Asia. This last decade of bilateral partnership has not only restored to some extent the traditional, historical cross-border linkages the Indian sub-continent previously enjoyed, it has also quietened the constant refrain that this region is among the least connected and overall underperforming. It is no coincidence that India and Bangladesh are now poised to be the precursors of regional connectedness and the relationship also reflects early glimpses towards developing regional value chains.

As neighbours with over 4000 kms of land borders as well as a maritime boundary (both of which were delineated peacefully), there exist many commonalities as well as the undeniable potential for conflict. India and Bangladesh also share 54 common rivers. The 1996 Ganges Water Treaty resolved one irritant but the unfulfilled promise of framing a river basin water-sharing formula as well as signing the Teesta River Agreement, continues to cast its shadow over a bilateral relationship that has grown multifold over the years. For the common Bangladeshi the lack of water-sharing agreements with New Delhi colours their view of India.

## Breakthrough in bilateral ties

Given the history and topography of the common terrain, several cross-border issues including illegal incursions by men and animals, drugs and weapons, continue to cause bilateral tensions. For a period Bangladeshi soil was used by anti-India elements which caused serious security concerns for New Delhi. While this was often denied by the then Bangladeshi leadership, the coming of Sheikh Hasina in 2009 purposefully shifted the bilateral narrative to a more cooperative framework. This break from the past was initiated even before the joint communique was signed in 2010.

**The Awami League coalition government led by Sheikh Hasina unilaterally addressed many of the outstanding security issues including closing the Indian insurgents' camps in Bangladesh and handing over the insurgents to India. The bilateral trajectory that subsequently evolved remains unparalleled in the history of Indo-Bangladesh ties.**

India reciprocated with the largest lines of credit (US\$7.8 billion) to Bangladesh and they together unveiled an ambitious developmental partnership.

Bangladesh is increasingly playing a critical role in many of India's foreign policy outreaches and the growing bilateral tie has showcased India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Bangladesh's support to India's Northeast region has made it a vital pivot for the 'Act East Policy,' while adding momentum to India's renewed focus for the BIMSTEC forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association too.

Through building cross border connectivity spread over varied transport systems, energy pipelines, as well as growing defence cooperation and a bilateral trade of nearly US 20 billion, the scope of the Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral relationship has been unprecedented and continues to grow despite global economic concerns.

This present phase is popularly known as the Sonali Adhaya (the golden period) and in fact has surpassed the extraordinary beginning the two shared during the Liberation War period.

Indeed, India and Bangladeshi bilateral relations predate the birth of this 51 year-old South Asian nation. Intent on moving away from the repression and violence that it suffered under Pakistani leadership, East Pakistan found support from India and the joint forces ensured a decisive victory and the formal birth of Bangladesh in December 1971. This exceptional friendship, however, faltered very soon with the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh and a close friend of India. The event not only led to drastic changes inside Bangladesh but also adversely impacted bilateral ties. Historically, the Awami League --- one of the main political parties and a chief architect of the birth of Bangladesh --- and India have enjoyed a strong friendship. Much of that changed during the longish period of consecutive military leaders who held sway till 1990.

## Too close a proximity to the

## Awami League

The return to parliamentary democracy in 1991 saw Bangladeshi polity dominated by three personalities and four political parties namely, Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the Awami League and daughter of Mujibur Rahman; Khaleda Zia, the leader of the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) and wife of Gen Ziaur Rahman who established the party during his presidential term; and General Ershad, the architect of the Jatiya Party also born out of the barracks, including the Jamaat-i-Islami, a religious political party that is now banned.

However, over the years, the Awami League has consolidated itself while the BNP is now in decline. India has always maintained a close proximity with the Awami League as the BNP has in the past consistently opposed India and Khaleda Zia's last term as prime minister during 2001-2006 will easily go down as the worst phase for bilateral ties.

Thus, irrespective of which party was in power in New Delhi, the Awami League government has always maintained friendly terms with India; this has not been the case for any non-Awami government in Dhaka.

Much of the bilateral growth discussed was possible as it was closely shepherded by the two sets of leaders on both sides. However, with an Awami League coalition government, that has continued to hold sway for the past 15 years through two parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019 (widely believed to be of very questionable validity), a distinct shift to an inegalitarian society with high levels of corruption, intrusion into media and personal liberty, growing economic woes and the emergence of a hybrid democracy is perceptible. The apparent Indian proximity and New Delhi's perceived support to Sheikh Hasina, who is exhibiting increasingly autocratic traits, has not gone unnoticed by a strong constituency that remains outside of the present political dispensation. Presently, the BNP is too weak to realistically be a challenge in the upcoming elections but for the sake of a free and fair election, it needs to be co-opted through some seat-sharing arrangement. This time around it would be very

difficult to legitimize another one-sided election. The likelihood of the Awami League moving away from its present avatar in the post Sheikh Hasina era will throw up further challenges for India.

Presently, government-to-government relations between the two neighbours are excellent but the people-to-people connect, the foundational basis of the bilateral ties, is tenuous. Arguably, the new generations on both sides are not bound by the emotions of the past and with religious polarity taking place in both countries, the new generational friendship cannot be taken for granted anymore. Is Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral developmental cooperation standing at a cusp of irreversible partnership? That is the moot question.

**In the face of ongoing overreach by China and subtle attempts by Pakistan to befriend Bangladesh, India cannot afford to be perceived as a friend by only a certain section of Bangladeshis. In an ever-evolving regional landscape, India needs more than just one Sheikh Hasina to uphold and sustain its interests in Bangladesh.**



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