

A sense of history shared

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THE year 1945 was a turning point in the context of movement for freedom in the South Asian subcontinent. With the end of Second World War and the election of a Labour Government in Britain headed by Clement Richard Attlee, it was assured that the British Government would quit India soon as a result of the demand made by both the Congress and the Muslim League for the departure of the British from India. But the process of independence was delayed because of the division of opinion between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. The Muslim League maintained that a separate state comprising Muslim majority areas could serve the interest of the Muslims. In March 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten was sent to India as a new Viceroy to arrange withdrawal of the British from India. Meanwhile, the Congress leadership accepted the concept floated by the Muslim League for the division of India into two countries on the basis of religion. The differences were resolved after new boundaries were drawn and two countries — one predominantly Muslim, the other predominantly Hindu — were established.

On 3rd June 1947, the British Government announced a policy statement, which is known as the Mountbatten plan, recognising the inevitability of the partition of India. As a part of the plan Pakistan was born on 14 August 1947 under the provisions of Indian Independence Act of 1947 passed by the British Parliament.

In Pakistan, there were five provinces each having its own provincial assembly. East Pakistan was one of the provinces of Pakistan, which now constituted present Bangladesh. The rest were Punjab, Sindh, North-west Frontier and Baluchistan. The most difficult and so far almost insurmountable problem with which Pakistan was confronted had been that of the nature of federalism and the relationship of the constituent provinces with the central government of the erstwhile Pakistan. The main reasons for the emergence of Bangladesh were the lack of Bengali participation in decision-making processes in Pakistan and the colonial a style economic exploitation of East Pakistan by the central government. It may be noted that Bengali-speaking population was the majority segment of the citizenry in the former Pakistan. Four basic factors, which contributed in breaking of Pakistan, were geographical, political, economic and cultural.

Geographical factor

Former East Pakistan and West Pakistan were 1200 miles apart; between them lies India. Geographically, the two wings of the former Pakistan were vastly divergent. West Pakistan, which includes most of the Indus River system, also has portions of the mighty ranges of the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas. Former East Pakistan is a semitropical land, most of which lies near sea level. Through it flows the lower part of the Brahmaputra and Ganges river basin, which is one of the most fertile alluvial lands in the world.

The significant fact is that there was no direct land communication between East and former West Pakistan. There is a popular belief that where West Pakistan ends, the Middle East begins, but where East Pakistan ends, South Asia starts.

Political factor

Between 1947 and 1951, power in erstwhile Pakistan rested successively with two non-Bengali leaders, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan. After Liaquat Ali's assassination in 1951, power actually passed into the hands of a small elite whose support came mainly from senior officers in the Pakistan civil service and army. Dictatorial cliques in Pakistan exercised hard suppression of the people and they identified themselves with a very microscopic dominant class. As a result, other deserving classes were deprived of share in power. Particularly the people from the former East Pakistan did not have any say in the governance of the country although they constituted majority of the population. They were never consulted in decision-making process. By 1970, only three Bengalis had attained the rank of secretary, out of twenty central secretaries. Similarly, there were only two Bengalis in the army, who had the privilege to enjoy the status of Lt. General and Maj. General, among thirty-five army officers of the rank of General, Lt. General and Maj. General.

Economic factor

From the economic point of view, East Pakistan remained neglected. The people of East Pakistan genuinely felt that their region was being exploited to mobilise their resources to serve the interest and needs of the people in

West Pakistan.

It is interesting to note that East Pakistan had a favourable trade balance with foreign countries during 50's and 60's. On the other hand, West Pakistan ran a deficit foreign trade balance. East Pakistan earned about 60 per cent of country's foreign currency while she received less than 30 per cent of imports. Over and above, East Pakistan suffered a constant deficit in trade between the two wings of the country. This clearly indicated a transfer of East Pakistan's resources to western part of Pakistan. This also demonstrates the fact that East Pakistan served as the captive market for the industries of West Pakistan.

There was a gap between per capita income of West Pakistan and that of East Pakistan. During 1959-1960, the income of the average West Pakistanis was 32 per cent higher than that of their eastern counterpart. By 1969-70, the per capita income of West Pakistan was 61 per cent higher than that of East Pakistan.

Only 22 families from West Pakistan controlled 66 per cent of the country's industries, 79 per cent of the insurance companies and 80 per cent of the banking organization.

Agriculturally West Pakistan was not developed, but with the construction of gigantic Mangla and Tarbala dam, huge land came under irrigation system and subsequently agriculturally west wing developed enormously. But no such steps were taken for the agricultural development of the East wing of the erstwhile Pakistan.

Cultural factor

The culture of two wings was distinctly different. By historical background, landscape, rivers, poetry and music East Pakistan was a distinct region. Cultural and social practices of the people of East Pakistan are diametrically opposite to those of West Pakistanis. In spite of distinct differences the ruler in the central government, which was dominated by West Pakistanis, had made attempt to impose Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan, the language spoken and understood by only seven per cent of the total population of Pakistan. The people from East Pakistan resisted the attempt of West Pakistanis against imposition of Urdu as state language. They quite legiti-

release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman unconditionally. Because of the pressure of the people Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was released from the prison in early 1969. A rousing reception of unprecedented nature was accorded to him in

Dhaka on its release. His role as the champion of the rights of Bengali people made him charismatic leader.

General Election in Pakistan

As a result of strong mass movement engineered by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Ayub Khan had to quit and another Military Ruler Gen Aga Mahmmd Yahya Khan took over the power. After assuming the power in February, 1969 he assured the nation that he would hand over the power to the people's representatives following holding the general elections in the country as soon as possible. Against this background, a general election was held in erstwhile Pakistan on 7th December 1970 by the military regime. The Awami League contested the election on all Pakistan basis. In the election the Awami League won 167 out of 313 seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan and of 169 seats reserved for East Pakistan. By dint of popular votes that he and his party received in the election Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became unchallenged leader in East Pakistan. In West Pakistan, Peoples Party obtained 88 seats and turned out to be second largest party. The Awami League won landslide victory in East Pakistan and a comfortable majority in the National Assembly (Parliament) of Pakistan. Therefore, it would have been logically wise to hand over power to the party which received an overwhelming majority in the assembly.

Non-Cooperation Movement

The President of Pakistan summoned the session of the National Assembly in Dhaka on 03 March 1971 after holding discussions with the leader of the majority party. Meanwhile, the leader of the People's Party Zulfikar Ali Bhutto refused to participate in the session of the National Assembly. He advocated for a grand coalition between Awami League and his party. It was not acceptable to Awami League. Without consulting the leader of the majority party the President announced dramatically to postpone the session of the National Assembly, which evoked sharp reaction from the people of East

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mately demanded that Bengali, which was mother language of 55 per cent of Pakistan's population, be one of the state languages. The resentment over this question had increased over the years and exploded in 1952. On February 21 in 1952 blood was shed by the student community in particular in defence of Bengali language and culture. The ruler in the central government of Pakistan finally had to accept the demand of the people of East Pakistan and Bengali was incorporated as one of the state languages of Pakistan in the Constitution of 1956.

Six-point formula

Against this backdrop of exploitation of the East by the West, the Awami League headed by its newly elected President Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who has been regarded as the Father of the Nation after Bangladesh came into being, launched his six-point formula for all provinces of Pakistan. The main thrust of the six points was the demand for autonomy. This was announced in February 1966 at Lahore after the council session of the Awami League. In fact six-point formula came as a *Magna Carta* for the establishment of self-determination of the people of East Pakistan in particular. The ruler in the central government did not accept the idea in good grace. Instead the government in power headed by General Ayub Khan resorted to ruthless suppression of the movement and arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A conspiratorial case, which came to known as Agartala Conspiracy case, was instituted against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The ruthless suppression of the six-point movement and the arrest of the advocates of this movement brought the Awami League into the limelight. The people of East Pakistan launched a campaign against Ayub regime and demanded

Pakistan. The leader of the majority party had no other option but to launch a country wide non-violent and non-cooperation movement against the central government in protest. In fact two parallel governments were in operation during non-cooperation movement. The response was so overwhelming that virtually the leader of the majority party-Awami League-became the ruler of East Pakistan. The central authority became worried to witness unprecedented response of the people in favour of the non-cooperation movement. On 6th March, 1971 the President of Pakistan again announced to convene the session of National Assembly on 25 March, 1971. On 7th March, 1971 in his historic speech at Suhrawardi Uddan Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave a clarion call to people and government employees to follow his instructions and declared that he would consider attending session of National Assembly only if four points are met. These were : Lifting of Martial law immediately; Transfer of power to the elected representatives; Recall of the troops to their barracks and to hold an enquiry into the killings of civilians by the army.

He appealed to the people to remain vigilant and prepared with whatever materials they possess to fight the enemy and declared that this time the movement is meant for freedom.

The President of Pakistan came to Dhaka on 15 March 1971, again to hold dialogue with the leader of Awami League, the leader of the majority party in the Parliament. Apparently talks were progressing satisfactorily between Awami League and the Military regime to resolve the crisis. The President of Pakistan came to an agreement on four points: lifting of martial law and transfer of power to the civilian authority by a presidential proclamation, transfer of power in the provinces to the majority parties, continuation of Aga

Mohammad Yahya Khan as President and in control of the central government, and separate sitting of the National Assembly members from the East and the West prior to preparatory joint session of the house to finalize the constitution. That was the impression given to the people.

Liberation War

But on the night of 25 March, the President of Pakistan suddenly dashed out of Dhaka. Simultaneously, the Pakistani army launched what was clearly a well-prepared and pre-planned brutal attack on the unarmed, unsuspecting and defenseless population of Dhaka and other towns of Bangladesh. The leader of the majority party, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested and sent to a jail in West Pakistan. Before his arrest he declared independence and in his message on this occasion he said "This may be my last message, from today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh wherever you might be 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 Pakistani occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved".

In his speech on arrival in Karachi the President of Pakistan branded the leader of the majority party, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as traitor and blamed the people of East Pakistan as secessionists to justify military action. But in fact it was the military junta, which declared a war of annihilation against the people of East Pakistan by banning the door of negotiations. Furthermore, East Pakistan comprised the majority of the population of Pakistan, and it was the heights of absurdity to suggest that the majority was seceding.

Since the war was imposed on the people of East Pakistan, the people resisted the operation of the Pakistan army. It was very difficult to resist well-organised and well-equipped trained soldiers. As a result, many hundreds of people, irrespective of any party affiliation, were massacred during the first three months of the army crackdown. The outside world was kept in the dark about the genocidal atrocities carried out by the Pakistan Military authorities in East Pakistan since the authorities bundled about 40 foreign journalists from the hotel International out of the country.

This unequal war continued till October when Mukti Bahini (freedom fighters) stepped up their activities and made the life of the Pakistani army unbearable. The Pakistan Army adopted divide and rule policy. They received cooperation of non-Bengali citizens of East Pakistan who did not assimilate themselves with the mainstream life and a handful of political leaders and their workers, who did not believe in the dismemberment of Pakistan and collaborated with the occupation forces and acted as traitors. Despite this division the majority of the population had extended help and all kinds of assistance to Mukti Bahini. By mid-1971, Mukti Bahini demonstrated its ability and had succeeded in destroying the morale of Pakistani army. The war of liberation was conducted in the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in his absence by the government in exile formed on 17th April 1971. Meanwhile, hundred and thousands of innocent people were massacred mercilessly and in the process of barbarity, the army also dishonored thousands of women. About ten million refugees from East Pakistan took shelter in India. She provided all kinds of assistance to the refugees at all cost.

Through a well coordinated action Mukti Bahini prepared the ground for an all out attack on the Pakistani forces. India recognized Bangladesh on 6th December, 1971 and joined the Mukti Bahini in defeating the common enemy responding to the Pakistani attack on both of them. Pakistani occupation army was finally forced to surrender on 16th December 1971 to the Joint Command of the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini. On 16th December Bangladesh emerged as independent and sovereign state in the world map. The war, which split Pakistan apart, was the most significant event in South Asian Sub-continent's history since the partition of British India in 1947.

Emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state is the culmination of a popular mass struggle followed by a bloody war of Independence spearheaded by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib , against the tyrannical Pakistani regime. This struggle was based on the Bengali Nationalism given a concrete shape by him through various politico-cultural movements. This was a major event in the history of the last Millennium. The people of Bangladesh is working hard for making a history in the next Millennium by turning their country into the Sonar Bangla (Golden Bengal) as dreamt of by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

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