

Bangladesh in retrospect

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THE Pakistan tragedy of 1971 was highly predictable and largely of her own making. The very concept of two peoples separated by geography, culture and language but bound together by Islam was nothing but unrealistic. Yet perhaps, it created a dream among millions to cling together for about 24 years since the partition of India in 1947. It was in such a background that the genesis of the Liberation Struggle for Bangladesh lay; the events coursing through the language movement, struggle for cultural emancipation of the Bengalis and that against interwoven economic disparity and political discrimination faced by the then East Pakistan in the hands of successive military bureaucracies in Pakistan. But at the heart of the politico-military bureaucracy was the conservative, 'anti-national' as well as 'anti-democratic' military establishment that assumed the role of the sole protector of the state. Any hint of regional democratic movement sparked off a good deal of resentment amongst the military institutions. In Pakistan from the beginning there was almost no thought of altering the traditional military structure vis-a-vis running of an independent state in the South Asian subcontinent.

The Pakistan army and the State

Pakistan was officially an Islamic state and its rulers had little of the socialist, secular and non-aligned character of a progressive civil society as aspired for by many nations in the post-war period. The US began providing it with military and economic assistance since 1951, and when Pakistan joined Dulles' two anti-Communist alliances – SEATO and CENTO – that foreign aid increased. By 1969 Pakistan had received up to \$2,000 million in American military assistance and \$3,000 million in economic aid. A large US military mission trained, equipped and advised the armed forces. The army expanded rapidly, more than tripling its manpower between 1947 and 1971. Such huge investment in weaponry buildups stood in stark contrast to the socio-economic underdevelopment in the eastern wing of Pakistan.

On the political plane, the increased strength and confidence of the army was demonstrated in its seizure of power in the 1958 coup

d'etat led by Gen. Ayub Khan, who later admitted to have conspired US officials, including the CIA Director, Allen Dulles, before taking over power. Army rule only exacerbated the psychological conflict between East and West Pakistan. It prevented the former using its large population with considerable edge in parliamentary elections to achieve policies favourable to its own benefits. In fact it meant greater economic exploitation of the East. The military consumed as much as 60 per cent of Pakistan's budget on the pretext of possible conflicts with India over Kashmir. Foreign exchange derived mainly from jute exports from the East was drawn upon to purchase weapons especially after the 1965-war with India, when most US military assistance was cut off. Nevertheless, Pakistan continued to receive military supplies from various western capitalist countries through its Muslim allies in the Middle East, and often directly. And no military deployment was in the West through the development of a network of garrison towns and the East gained little from the military spending and the jobs it created.

The Pakistan army continued the colonial pattern of recruiting mainly from amongst the so-called 'martial races' of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province; Bengalis made up less than 10 per cent, mostly in the lower ranks, of estimated 350,000-strong armed forces (in 1970-71) although they at that time constituted 56 per cent of the national population. And only two out of the top 50 officials were Bengalis. But most potent was the situation related with economic disparity, often linked with cultural persecution. Thus from the earliest years of Pakistan's creation the Bengalis of the East felt themselves to be at the neglected end of the deal.

The growing economic disparity between East and West, the former's lack of voice in its own affairs, the geographical absurdity of the country, and the great cultural differences between the two wings combined to produce an increasingly potent nationalist fervour in the East. Accumulated grievances burst forth through large-scale student and popular unrest during 1968-69 leading up to the fall of Ayub regime. A new military administration led by Yahya Khan calling itself an interim government promised nation-wide elections. These were held in December, 1970 and fought, among others, on the issue of provincial

autonomy. The Awami League led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won an overwhelming victory in East Bengal with a large enough majority to dominate the National Assembly. Mujib was poised to be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the West Pakistani, winning an overall majority there, did not have the stomach for this political eventuality. West Pakistani interests saw their domination threatened, and the military regime of Yahya Khan, in collusion with Mr Bhutto and the military hawks, postponed the convening of the Assembly. The Awami League responded by organising a mass non-violent resistance across the country followed by a decisive declaration, on 7 March 1971, in a mammoth meeting at the

expected in the face of revolt and armed resistance from the Bengalees. Bengali units in the armed forces had been moved by the nationalist sentiment and cultural attachment that swept the eastern wing of Pakistan. These regular forces and police together with pro-Awami League students and volunteers formed the initial core of that resistance. But they lacked training or experience in formal as well as guerrilla warfare. They did not yet know how to mobilise the overwhelming support of the mass of common population and offset the numerical military superiority of the West Pakistani soldiers. Against such a backdrop of rather unplanned resistance, most of the Bengali forces and their officers along with streams of intellectuals, political

Once war was declared on 3 December 1971 by Pakistan, India moved swiftly into East Bengal with the help of the Mukti Bahini guerillas, who were then militarily active inside the country. This was a well planned and executed operation that resulted in the shameful defeat of the Pak military forces with about 90,000 of them taken prisoner in just two weeks.

Race Course in Dacca by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman charting the direction of the movement towards independence of Bangladesh. But the West Pakistani military junta decided to meet this political challenge with one of the most brutal military onslaughts ever seen in post-war world. There was no option but to declare long cherished independence of Bangladesh on the early hours of 26 March 1971 by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. And since he had been arrested, this was later followed by a similar declaration on Bangabandhu's behalf by Maj Ziaur Rahman from Chittagong. Meanwhile, the Bangali military units from Pakistani cantonments located mostly in Rangpur, Jessore and Gazipur put up initial armed resistance to Pakistani attacks. Within a short time, similar but mostly sporadic military resistance by Bengali army units erupted elsewhere in the country.

The War of Liberation: A geo-strategic review

When the Pakistan army began its crackdown on the night of 25 March 1971, their prime objectives were to disarm the Bengali armed and paramilitary forces and to subdue the students and pro-Awami League elements in East Bengal. But this proved to be more difficult than

leaders, students, workers, peasants and ordinary people crossed over the border into India -- to be regrouped by the end of April to form a liberation force to free Bangladesh. Streams of refugees who sought shelter across the border in India in order to save themselves from military persecution accompanied this.

The second phase of resistance was marked by a consideration of three main approaches not all of which were adopted. The first one was based on a conventional, post-colonial army tradition led by some regular Bengali officers under the overall guidance of Col M A G Osmani who was appointed Commander of the resistance forces by the Bangladesh government in exile. This approach was to organise all trained Bengali military personnel into conventional units, which would operate from bases in India. And their political goal was to bring an Awami League government to power in Bangladesh as soon as possible with the Indians helping. The basis of this approach might have been tied with the Indian government's decision by the middle of April that it was in its own interest to aid the resistance in East Bengal. This led to the setting up of a number of guerilla training camps within India for the Bengali youths to be subsequently sent into Bangladesh.

The second approach largely rejected the strategic concepts insisting that both the political and military headquarters should be based on Bangladesh soil. They were largely in favour of building up a people's army, on the socialist ideological premise, to fight off the Pakistanis through guerilla warfare by raising and training peasant guerilla battalions based on a number of still 'active pockets of resistance' within the country. It was in their view that by this way the Bengalis could win independence without direct military intervention from outside. In view of this development some people (including Indian policymakers) apprehended that the Bangladesh guerilla activities might slide towards the leftists' hand.

The third approach was the action

December 1971 by Pakistan, India moved swiftly into East Bengal with the help of the Mukti Bahini guerillas, who were then militarily active inside the country. This was a well planned and executed operation that resulted in the shameful defeat of the Pak military forces with about 90,000 of them taken prisoner in just two weeks. As indicated by a number of sources, the inability of the Pakistan army to fight back was largely due to their low morale born of acts of genocide and persecution that entirely alienated them from the Bengali population as well as lack of purpose of their mission. With lack of local support, they preferred unconditional surrender to being hacked to death in the hands of peasants and guerillas. Pakistan was persuaded

the end of January 1972. This, indeed, is still regarded as one of the most successful voluntary repatriation of refugees in the world.

The war over, India simply ignored the Chinese taunts by ensuring the authority of a Bangladesh government, independent of any strings pulled in New Delhi. Mrs Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister, made her intention clear that India would never interfere in the internal affairs of Bangladesh, but live as a neighbour in peace and friendship, and that the Indian army will remain only so long as the Bangladesh government required them. This was rightly borne out through the subsequent events in the earlier months of 1972.

The victory of India-Bangladesh joint forces mainly rested on India's superiority in numbers, firepower and intelligence network. This superiority was all the more made effective by the activities of the Mukti Bahini guerillas inside and behind the enemy lines within Bangladesh. And, above all Mrs Gandhi's sense of vision carefully defined and maintained sense of purpose led the whole political and military operation to a definite conclusion. Pakistan presented a sad contrast. Yahya Khan had become, by the time the open war erupted, a pathetic figure, reduced to empty blustering from his Islamabad recluse, from which he rarely emerged. That Yahya's two top generals, Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan – Corps Commander in Kashmir, butcher of Baluchistan and Bengal and of notoriously low military calibre; and Lt. Gen. Niazi – a crude, brutal and demonstrably vicious officer who almost openly encouraged his soldiers in their campaign of rape and pillage in Bangladesh, could rise so high was a measure of

the decline in quality of what has long been regarded as a competent army! Even the recently published Hamdood Rahman's report on the defeat of Pakistan forces testifies such credentials of these two generals.

At the international fronts, the US, a symbol of human rights, democracy and freedom, through Mr. Farland, Ambassador in Islamabad, sought to moderate the military junta's crass, harsh policy in East Bengal but this was tinkering with, not tackling the problem. Russia sought to restrain India from going over the brink, and Mr. Pegov, Ambassador in New Delhi, had many anxious sessions with top Indian officials in the attempt to ward off a large-scale confrontation.

But with increasing successes of the Mukti Bahini guerillas inside Bangladesh, the mix was explosive, and it exploded. But the Chinese continued to make threatening noises in support of their strange ultra-rightist, pro-American and capitalist bedfellow – the Pakistan warlords. The US Seventh Fleet remained ominously floating off the Bangladesh coast on a mission as yet not convincingly explained. The Russian fleet too was on its way as observer.

Historically Pakistan thrived on a hatred towards India and on a determination to turn East Bengal, in the postcolonial age, into the most exploited colony – all in the name of Islamization. For a time, it seemed that, she shared some of India's prestige on the international stage but subsequently, military rule was the only means available to her for disguising the fact that she represented neither a political fact nor an ideal.

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First flame of armed resistance

COL MASOUDUL HOSSAIN KHAN

WITH regard to the commencement of armed resistance or revolt against the Pakistani Armed Forces in the then East Pakistan in 1971, there are a number of write-ups, legends and books. I came across different versions, stories and controversies, as perhaps many others must have similarly done.

Second Battalion of the East Bengal Regiment nick-named JUNIOR TIGERS or in short also called 2 E Bengal in military abbreviation, was stationed at Joydevpur in the present district of Gazipur from mid-1968 to the beginning of the Armed Resistance in March 1971. Needless to mention, I being successively posted as Company Commander (1966-67), then Second-in-Command (1968-69), Officially Commanding Officer from early 1969 and subsequently promoted to the full command in 1970 of this battalion, remained there till 23rd March, 1971 when I was taken to custody. I ought to be aware of the affairs of my unit i.e 2 E Bengal the JUNIOR TIGERS.

As political unrest beginning towards the end of February 1971 led up to Non-cooperation Movement in East Pakistan, proclaimed by the Head of Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Bangabandhu) following the postponement of the National Assembly session earlier scheduled to be held on the 3rd March 1971 in Dhaka created commotion, wild-guessing (imagination) suspense etc among the rank and file of our troops who were hundred per cent of Bangalee origin, with the exception of a few Officers, Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) who were West Pakistanis. When such was the state of affairs in my Battalion, housed at the "Rajbari" of old Bhawal Raja of Joydevpur, surrounded by civilians in neighboring villages, the unit was under the formation command of the Brigade at Dhaka Cantonment, though isolated from that cantonment by about 20 miles. There was no bar for us to go around if required and meet civilians. In fact, owing to shortage of official accommodation for families of some JCOs/NCOs and other ranks (ORs) a few of them were permitted to hire houses in neighbouring villages officially as was in vogue in almost all cantonments of the country (including West Pakistan) in those days. Therefore, what was being expressed in civilian circles about day to day developments in the country, were within the knowledge of the rank and file of our unit. Besides, from 1st March '71 radio, television and newspapers were also casting news, views, cultural programmes, thereby rousing and awakening Bangalee Nationalism. Under the prevailing situation reports of atrocity under Martial Law by Pakistani troops in Dhaka and other big towns of the then East Pakistan made the ranks anxious and apprehensive about what lay in store.

I being the unit Commander, was kept abreast by the first morning report of the Subedar Major about the Unit's affairs as a routine and also by my Second-in-Command,

Major KM Safiullah (Later Maj Gen and first Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army), the Adjutants, Capt ASM Nasim (Later Lt Gen and Chief of Army Staff), Capt Azizur Rahman (later Maj Gen) and Company Commander, Maj Moinul Hussain Chowdhury (later Maj Gen). Coincidentally, all these above-named Officers, JCOs and a few more of my Company Commanders and other officers (majority of whom were promoted to the rank of Maj-Gen in Bangladesh Army and all are retired by now, which also includes Maj Gen Nurul Islam (Shishu) who became an Adviser in Gen Zia's Cabinet, Maj Gen's Ejaz Ahmed Chowdhury ex-DG BDR, Golam Helal Morshed Khan and Syed Mohd Ibrahim) were Bangalees and in this respect I was lucky to have them in my team as Commanding Officer of the "Junior Tigers", particularly in dealing with that trying situation of March '71.

On the one hand, under the cover of Martial Law and imposition of curfew at night, Pakistani authorities were trying to restore law and order by oppression, while on the other hand Bangabandhu was calling for total non-cooperation, strikes and blockading of road, rail communication which continued till about 23rd

Besides, we also apprehended disarming of our units, particularly the JUNIOR TIGERS, which was in possession of surplus arms and ammunition of British and American vintage. Despite an order received by me to return and deposit by 15th March '71 these surplus weapons of old vintage (which were earlier replaced by those of Chinese origin that were being manufactured in our Ordnance factory at Rajendrapur), I was able to temporarily convince the authority not to stake such sensitive military hard-ware with the road blocks erected by the followers of non-cooperation and managed to save those for the probable "Rainy Day" ahead.

Brig Jahanzeb Arbab, Commander 57 Brigade under which the "Junior Tigers" were, decided to visit us on the plea of an inspection of the Battalion on 19th March, 1971. He talked to me over his mobile wireless set to which I was also netted and connected, that he had not seen us for some time and as such would like to inspect my troops as well as have lunch with us at the Officers' Mess at Joydevpur after the inspection. He also informed me of a few accompanying staff officers and an escort Party for his safe passage through

palace and was wonder-struck by observing our troop's battle-worthiness and enquired from us its reason. Our reply was simple and straight-forward as per your original Operational Order when you warned us to be always on the readiness to either proceed to the borders in the event of probable Indian-in-cursion, or to remain prepared to be in 'Aid of civil power', if they fail to uphold law and order, here we are in readiness for such duties". Hearing this answer Brig Arbab and his team quietly followed us for a sumptuous lunch that we laid for them. The Brigadier's escort party of a Company strength (more than 100 bodies), were resting and having tea etc at our training ground outside the palace and also keeping watch over the area around.

While we were in the midst of lunch, in came an officer of the protection/escort-body of the visiting Commander to inform of a strong barricade laid by the civilians of Joydevpur by placing a number of loaded goods-wagons across the railway level crossing and blocking the road through the crossing of the rail-track. One or two of my unit officers of West Pakistani origin, who were naturally more loyal to the

face.

However, finding myself in a critical and delicate situation as Commanding Officer of an Infantry Battalion of the then Pakistan Army (19th March '71), when they were negotiating with Sheikh Mujib, the Leader of the probable House of Parliament and future Prime Minister of the then country and without knowing the eventual outcome, on the one hand; and on the other to open fire and apply force, on my people of the same ethnic-group and my land, for a while I was perplexed. However, I soon recovered myself and tactfully ordered my Company Commander in the front line, Maj Moinul Hussain in my own language without much of hearing of the Pakistani Brigadier, that he (Maj Moin) as per training, ought to do all formalities of warning the mob by showing the Red-Flag, sounding Bugle-Call and announcing in Megaphone, that if they do not disperse, they would be fired upon, as is permissible by the law of land in dealing with civil disobedience. I also winked at and whispered to Maj Moin not to fire for effect, rather try to terrorise and disperse the crowd by more of showing off by firing a few shots overhead and under knee.

But, the cunning Brig a few minutes later understood and warned us, that if he does not find a man dropping against each bullet fired he would be constrained to deploy his own troops (the escort party) to do the needful. Without any delay he did the same and started firing over our heads and flanks with all his weapons including automatics that resulted in a number of dead and wounded eventually. The mob from the opposite direction also started replying with their available shot guns, '22 rifles, spears, brick bats and so on. We were caught in cross-fire, sustaining some casualties including a number of Pakistani troops of the Brigadier. After about an hour of firing and skirmish, crowds dispersed apprehending of firing by regular army and we managed to clear the way for Brig Arbab and his party to depart.

One facet of the important episode was, when we were busy in skirmishes at the level crossing near Joydevpur bazaar, the ration drawing party from our Company located then at Tangail arrived at the spot in a truck from the opposite direction and was perplexed when confronted with the situation. This party was under command of an NCO (Non Commissioned Officer) and was composed of six or seven other soldiers including the driver. They were briefed by the activists that the Brigade Commander from Dhaka had come with troops and were fighting the Junior Tigers to disarm. Soon after, they also joined the mob returning the fire of the Brigadier's troops. Some of our troops at this side also retailed the Pakistani soldiers (escorting the Brigadier) with fire from their personal weapons. Thus, it was eventually an armed resistance that for the first time occurred in the soil of the then East Pakistan, on that day i.e Friday the 19th of March 1971, against the Pakistani Army.

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March, '71. However, by mid-March Pakistani President Gen Yahya Khan came to Dhaka with his team and started some sort of negotiation with Bangabandhu to arrive at some settlement of the problem, which was but political, rather than military as was previously also opined by personalities like Admiral Ahsan the outgoing Governor of the province. Lt Gen Sahibzada Yakob Khan ex-Commander of the then Eastern Command, who also preferred like Admiral Ahsan to resign (in who's place came Lt Gen Tikka Khan) and Maj Gen Khadim Hussain Raja, the then GOC, 14 Division.

It appeared to us later that the so-called negotiation by the Pakistani establishment with the chief of Awami League and the prospective prime minister of the country was nothing but a ploy to gain time to restrengthen the garrisons of the then East Pakistan for their impending Operation of 25th March 1971.

However, reverting back to conditions and situations in early March '71, one thing was clear to me and my Bangalee colleagues that Pakistan Army was hell-bent upon dividing and isolating the East Bengal Regiment battalions into penny-packets moving the Companies (sub units) from the Battalion Headquarters on the fake pleas of Indian concentration in borders, to aid civil administration in the event of possible breakdown of law and order, because of the non-cooperation call by Bangabandhu and also on the ground of training exercises in some cases, as was gathered by contacting 1 E Bengal at Jessore (then Commanded by Lt Col Rezaul Jalil), 3 E Bengal at Rangpur, 4 E Bengal at Comilla (where the 2 IC was Maj Khaled Mosharrar, late Maj Gen and 8 E Bengal at Chittagong, (where Second-in-Command was Maj Zia, later late President).

Tongi Industrial Area and possible road-blocks on the way. Most of us (including Maj Moinul Hussain, who confided mostly with me since first week of March '71) "smelt rat" on such proposal from Brig Arbab who was by then renowned in Dhaka as a killer of Bangalees. Without losing a minute, we alerted all available troops in Joydevpur Palace to be in battle-worthy conditions, fully armed and equipped, deploying themselves at all vital points/installations and also establishing a forward Warning Post at Joydevpur-Tangail and Dhaka-Mymensingh Road Crossing, under command of an officer to be in touch with us through our internal wireless net and the field telephone line.

Somehow the civilian people of our area also came to know about the imminent arrival of the visitors who had already spread this news as the probable action of disarming us and taking away the surplus weapons and ammunition in our stock. They not only alerted the people from Tongi to all around Joydevpur-Rajendrapur, Ordnance Factory and Machine Tools Factory, but also erected barricades/road-blocks by felling trees and collecting bricks from nearby brick fields all along the highway leading to Joydevpur. In a nutshell they were with us to prevent any attempt of disarming the JUNIOR TIGERS. They also came out in procession and assembled in thousands at Joydevpur Bazaar area, close to the "Rajbari" where we were stationed.

The Brigadier Arbab and his party managed to arrive in the Palace after clearing dozens of road-blocks and barricades from Tongi onwards by about lunch-time. He accompanied by his staff officers including a Lt col, two majors and a few captains went round the ancient corridors, hundreds of halls and rooms of the

Pakistanis, also seconded the report. On hearing this report, Brig Arbab left the dining table holding me by my arm almost dragging me out and ordering to clear the barricade in question at once, for his safe exit from Joydevpur. I asked and requested him to finish his lunch, and I myself proceeded with Maj Moin, my only Rifle Company Commander left with me at Joydevpur to handle the situation, assuring the Brigadier that we would soon do the needful for his start of safe return journey to Dhaka Cantonment. The 2IC, Major Safiullah was left to act as host to the visitors. Captains Nasim, then HQ Coy Comd and Aziz, my Adjutant also accompanied us to the scene of occurrence. Maj Moin and I being tactful, contacted the civilian activists and their leaders to assure and convince them that we were not being disarmed as feared earlier and the visiting Brigadier and his party were keen to get back to Dhaka Cantonment, and for that purpose they should remove the barricade and clear the level crossing for the visitors to pass through.

In the meantime, Brig Arbab with his full contingent of so-called staff officers and protection party of well-armed/equipped men appeared behind us and without caring a damn about my request to wait for my report started shouting at us, "what the hell are you doing to negotiate with the traitors, better use maximum force to disperse the mob, including firing all your weapons at your disposal in order to remove the barricade". To this inhuman attitude and order of Brig Jahanzeb Arbab, I politely retorted, "Sir how do you expect us to use maximum force and weapons on our own citizens and kith and keen, in order to quell Civil-Disobedience? They are not our enemy in the battle-field", which he did not like as was apparent from his