

# Super powers in liberation war

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**T**HE two super powers that dominated a largely bipolar world until the early 1990s played a significant role in the liberation war of Bangladesh. The part they played in the sanguinary birth of Bangladesh was defined by the strategic shifts that occurred in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Since those times spectacular changes in the international world order have transformed the world. The Soviet Union, one of the super powers that had a positive role in the emergence of Bangladesh, collapsed from within by 1992. The end of the Soviet Union also signified the retreat of socialism in Europe and the end of the cold war in a bi-polar world.

In consequence, the other super power, the United States of America became a virtual hyper power in a uni-polar world. Other remarkable developments also marked the international scenario. Many developing nations emerged as regional powers and are in the process of becoming great powers. Included in the list of these rising powers are China, India, Brazil and South Africa. China is emerging as the second largest economy in the world of our times, while India is also rapidly developing as a significant power. The post cold war world is thus pregnant with the possibility of becoming a multi-polar world replacing the present uni-polar dispensation.

It may be difficult for the generations born after the 1990s to understand and appreciate the international backdrop in which Bangladesh was born. The bi-polar world in which the balance of terror was created by nuclear parity of the super powers is

also a thing of the past. It is not easy to understand how things were during those times. Nevertheless, hindsight may contribute to a clearer understanding of the dramatic emergence of Bangladesh in the context of relentless competition and rivalry launched by the super powers.

During the 1960s apparently strong ties of comradeship between the Soviet Union and China loosened. This ended the myth of a monolithic communist camp. By the late '60s China on her own became a major actor on the international stage. On the capitalist side, strains appeared in the anticommunist coalitions. Non-military, especially economic issues came to the forefront. Conflict of interest increased between the United States and its closest cold war allies, Western Europe and Japan. As a result of all this the cold war coalitions on both sides gradually weakened.

In a world where the challenge of secessionism was met by existing states and international order with stern measures, any secessionist group would be faced with virtually insurmountable obstacles. Nevertheless, in the case of Bangladesh the attempt to secede from a repressive state was crowned with success.

The Caesarean birth of Bangladesh marked the success of the first armed separatist struggle in the post colonial Third World. How then, precisely, the development of the polycentric world still dominated by two super powers helped hasten the birth of Bangladesh? The case of Bangladesh underscores the fact that not only regional and inter-state rivalries, but intra-state ethno-linguistic, economic and politi-



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cal conflict can also threaten to draw the super powers to the edge of war.

#### The role of Soviet Union

The Soviet Union was the first great power to deplore publicly the Pakistani military crackdown on Bengalis. It was also the first major power to officially recognize the State of Bangladesh, which it did within thirty eight days of its de facto liberation from the Pakistani forces.

The response of the Soviet Union to the 1971 crisis in East Pakistan was conditioned by the general Soviet policy with regard to Asia in the 1960s. It was a policy of growing involvement, initially undertaken to contain America's influence in Asia, but increasingly directed at stemming the diplomatic and military as well as ideological advance of China which at that time was emerging as the Soviet Union's principal rival in the Third World. The Soviet Union's desire to present its credentials as an Asian

power, its desire to counter potential American, Japanese or Chinese backed schemes for alliances and alignments led to its launching in the spring of 1969 a campaign for a system of collective security in Asia. This campaign became the mainstay of the Soviet Union's diplomacy in Asia as events and developments in the South Asian sub-continent were setting the stage for the conflict in East Pakistan.

The Soviet Union's close tie with India was a vital factor in shaping the Soviet response towards the East Pakistan crisis in 1971. An amiable working relationship had prevailed between the two countries since the visit of Bulganin and Khrushchev to New Delhi in December 1955. The Indo Soviet ties were further strengthened in the wake of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. India's defeat in the 1962 clash and the worsening Sino-Soviet relations eventually (mainly during 1969-1971) caused Moscow to

attach more significance to its ties with India. As the dominant power in the South Asian subcontinent, India could be built up as an effective counterpoise to China and thus could provide help to Moscow to contain Beijing militarily and diplomatically.

Another important factor behind the Soviet Union's response and rather close involvement in the 1971 crisis in South Asia was the Soviet image as "a Great Power situated on two continents Europe and Asia" which, as the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, speaking in the Supreme Soviet in June 1968, said, did not "plead with anybody to be allowed to have their say in the solution of any question involving the maintenance of international peace, concerning the freedom and independence of the peoples..."

The relatively high priority given by the Soviet policy makers to Bangladesh crisis in 1971 was the consequence of their perception of the contemporary world and Asia and the proper Soviet role in both the world and Asian dimensions as a great power. Moscow was concerned about maintaining the stability and security of its ally, India. It wanted to ensure the position of India as the dominant power in South Asia. Bangladesh might have been viewed by the leaders of the Soviet Union as "a fringe responsibility to their Indian interests", but in 1971 it was of considerable importance to them as the first test case of their political and diplomatic abilities in an emerging "triangular world". The Sino-American detente had opened Moscow's eyes to

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# Genocide studies at epicentre of genocide

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**F**EW universities can match what Dhaka University has achieved since its inception.

It was established in 1921, but in less than a hundred years of its establishment it has made significant contributions to the history of Bangladesh, particularly in the making of the nation. Two events are noteworthy.

The first one relates to the historic language movement in 1952, when students of Dhaka University laid down their lives for making Bangla as one of the national languages of the state of Pakistan. The event is now nationally observed on 21 February and Dhaka University is the official host of the event. National leaders, foreign dignitaries and millions of people, all barefooted, congregate at the footsteps of the Shaheed Minar (Martyrs Monument) located at Dhaka University on 21 February to pay homage to the "brave sons of the soil." It may be mentioned that UNESCO has declared the day as the International Mother Language Day. Dhaka University can take pride in hosting the event and having the day internationally recognised.

Secondly, Dhaka University is the only university in the world where the students raised the flag of the country and handed it over to the national leaders. This took place on 2 March 1971, incidentally several weeks before Pakistan military's recourse to genocide and the proclamation of independence. This flag became the rallying call for independence and the symbol of the new nation during the nine-month liberation struggle.

On the night of 25 March 1971 Dhaka University became a predictable target of the Pakistan military. But who were the victims? In a multi-class society subalternity could never be uni-dimensional or linear. Given the semi-colonial experience of the Bengalis, the Awami League could

easily muster support in favour of a 'nationalist' campaign against the repressive state of Pakistan. The campaign was summed up in the Six-Point program, incidentally launched in 1966, which later became the agenda of the party in the general elections in 1970. The cry of 'Joy Bangla' in fact, symbolized the nationalist aspirations of the people, mainly to overcome the semi-coloniality of the nation. But the semi-colonial experience was only one aspect of subalternity of the Bengalis. The society had other subaltern layers, mainly the disempowered, marginalized population. But then, how obvious were these in times of genocide? Or, to put it slightly differently, is there a wilful blurring of subalternity on the part of the state and statist discourses? And if so, what does it signify? The mass murder at the hands of the Pakistan military in Dhaka University does shed some light on this.

M.A. Rahim, a professor of history, while reflecting on the 'last sixty years' (1921-1981) of Dhaka University and the role the latter played in the nationalist movement culminating in 1971, stated:

The Dacca University Campus was made one of the principal targets of attack by the army. The military leaders considered that the Dacca University was the centre of the Bangladesh movement, and hence intended to cleanse it once and for all....It is estimated that about 200 students were killed in the Iqbal Hall (later Zahirul Haq Hall). Many of these dead bodies were removed by the soldiers. Two days after 30 bodies were found still lying there....It is estimated that about 300 persons, including 10 teachers and 26 other employees were killed in the University on the night of 25<sup>th</sup> and in the morning of 26<sup>th</sup> March.

The commentary of US Consul

General, Archer K. Blood, on the Pakistan military's attack on the University was more telling:

We saw traces of two mass graves in the campus, one near Iqbal Hall, the other near Rokeya Hall....The students at Iqbal Hall, some of who had weapons, were either shot in their rooms or mowed down when they came out of the building in groups. Rokeya Hall, a dormitory for girl students, was set ablaze and the girls were machine gunned as they fled the buildings. The attack seemed to be aimed at eliminating the female student leadership since many girl student leaders resided in that Hall.

Both the accounts give an impression that the University was at the 'centre' of the movement and that the Pakistan military was targeting the 'armed students' residing there. There is an element of truth in so far as the first account goes but not so much in the second account. The victims, apart from faculty members and students, included caretakers, gardeners, security guards, sweepers, canteen owners and even peons. Put differently, not only scholars and students but also unarmed and relatively marginalized people were brutally murdered.

A critical question however remains, what role must Dhaka University play for being what can be regarded as an epicentre of genocide? It is an irony and somewhat sad that such a question is raised nearly four decades after the gruesome killing of its members, which included gardeners, peons, caretakers, security guards, canteen owner, students, teachers, officials, and many more. One thing is certain that Dhaka University as the epicentre of genocide and for sacrificing so much for the cause of democracy and emancipation has a lot to offer not only to the nation and the world but to humanity as a whole. And it is precisely for this that the

authorities of Dhaka University, indeed, with active support from faculty members, campus officials, family members, even students, old and new, and the society at large have embarked upon the noble task of establishing a Centre for Genocide Studies within the premise of its campus.

The Centre shall be a non-profitable, non-political research based academic institution of professionals, researchers, planners, policy makers and academics. To make its task unique in this part of the world, the Centre for Genocide Studies at the University of Dhaka has a declaratory mandate to perform four sets of activities.

First is research. Apart from having critical research on 1971 Bangladesh genocide and the ones that occurred elsewhere in the past or since then, there should be a concerted effort to collect the 'life stories' of each and every dead and living victim as well as of perpetrators of Bangladesh genocide. In fact, students each year of various faculties will be mobilized to work on this time consuming task. This would not only bring down the cost of the research but would also allow the students to be exposed to what is certainly a tragic episode in the country's history.

Second is teaching. Courses of all kinds, semester-wise or year-long, including those designed for the professionals, will be offered by the Centre for Genocide Studies. Such courses on genocide and mass violence need not be limited to social science students but would also be offered to the students of science and business faculties. It may be mentioned that given the task of unearthing mass graves and various killing fields specialized branches like forensic medicine, forensic science, forensic anthropology or forensic pathology will be developed at the Centre for Genocide Studies. This would cer-

tainly attract students from diverse faculties.

Third is having 'genocide tour' for the public. The birth of Bangladesh, as indicated earlier, cannot be contemplated without taking into consideration the glorious role and the painful sacrifice of Dhaka University. As a result the campus has become a destination for the tourists, both local and foreign. But such touristic exposure of Dhaka University needs to be made more informative, authentic and efficient, and the Centre for Genocide Studies with student-volunteers as tour guides can certainly play a role.

Last but not least is housing a genocide museum and an archive. The Centre for Genocide Studies will take the responsibility of attracting a large number of people from within the country and beyond for collecting genocidal relics and printed and visual materials of all kinds, including posters, photos and pamphlets, relating to genocide and mass violence. And this need not be of Bangladesh alone but would be of places and times wherever state machineries and vested quarters have unleashed their darkest side of being and resorted to torture, rape, killing and other forms of mass violence. A cue could be taken from various genocidal museums around the world, including Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh (Kampuchea), Kigali Memorial Centre in Kigali City (Rwanda), Armenian Genocide Museum of America and Holocaust Museum both in Washington DC (USA). A critical awareness of genocide and mass violence is bound to embolden the person engaged in the vital task of putting an end to all crimes against humanity. As the epicentre of genocide let Dhaka University and the Centre for Genocide Studies embark upon this noble task.

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