

Behind the "RAW" tirade



WHY would Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fire a salvo like this ahead of her India visit in April by accusing Indian intelligence agency RAW and the US embassy of bringing down her government in 2001?

Those who blame Hasina as pro-India may be shocked. BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul has hit back, denying the charge that RAW and US helped Khaleda Zia come to power in 2001. In a counter-attack, he alleged RAW played a role in helping Hasina return to power in 2014. But those who know Hasina closely have no difficulty figuring out why she said what she did.

As Bangabandhu's daughter, Hasina has close relations with a host of Indian leaders, especially in Congress and the Left. No wonder President Pranab Mukherjee has offered to host her during her April visit and the Modi government has accepted it. Over the last two years, she has developed good relations with PM Narendra Modi and some senior BJP leaders like Tripura governor Tathagata Roy and editor-turned-MP Chandan Mitra. So she has no reasons to deal with RAW or Indian agencies and bureaucrats. She has been well disposed towards some diplomats who have served in Bangladesh and has used normal diplomatic channels to officially communicate with India. The Awami League has enough political channels to deal with Indian leadership, even with the BJP. And I can vouch for what she once told Indian national security adviser during the Vajpayee regime Brajesh Mishra who had suggested some



Indian President Pranab Mukherjee meets with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka in 2013.

PHOTO: PTI

the Chinese, Mukherjee with his old Russian links going back to Indira Gandhi days managed Putin. The US was outplayed.

That equation has now changed. The BJP is back in power, like in 2001, but Modi has done nothing to revert to the Mishra line. During his Dhaka visit and ever since, Modi has decided to back the Hasina government whole hog. There is a growing appreciation for how much Hasina has done to address India's security and connectivity concerns. A Hindu-CSDS survey on public attitudes in India recently showed more Indians trusted Bangladesh as a reliable friend - 48 percent against 46 percent who pitched for Russia. But it is now payback time. Hasina expects India to deliver on the water sharing deals - Teesta and Ganges barrage.

The tirade against RAW for what happened in 2001 is her way of reminding Delhi - ahead of the April visit - that it is payback time, now that Modi is in a very strong position after BJP victories in state polls like UP. The BNP has tried its best to connect to the BJP to back the cause of fresh and interim polls under caretaker administration in Bangladesh. Mathur who was later posted in London maintained his links with Tarique until his retirement two years ago. The signal Hasina may be sending out to the BJP is clear - don't try dealing with the BNP a la 2001.

She may also be trying to silence the BNP and other opposition who are clamouring for her to present details of all pacts she will sign with India - especially any pact on defence cooperation.

If I understand the signals from Dhaka correctly, which I usually do, Hasina will not go for a defence pact anytime soon, but restrict it to a MOU - neither upsetting India nor China and surely not her own army. And she will insist she must have the water deals before she considers any further concessions to India.

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The writer is a former BBC Correspondent and author.

minister, the late Abdus Samad Azad to Calcutta to touch base with Jyoti Basu, she did not need RAW or any Indian secret agency. A phone call to Basu was good enough to set the ball rolling. Khaleda Zia was critical why Bangladesh's foreign minister should go to a state (*angorajyo*) to settle bilateral problems, but Hasina and Awami League, with its experience of spearheading the Liberation War, know the value of border states like West Bengal and Tripura and the role its leaders have played to uphold the interest of Bengalis from across the borders. This 'very Bengali equation' is never intelligible to a leader who saw 1971 from Pakistan-ravaged Dhaka through a pair of lens very different from those who spearheaded the struggle from Indian soil. But Hasina uses this 'friends of Bangladesh' factor so effectively because she knows these Bengali leaders in India so well personally. Tripura chief minister Manik Sarkar has often been described as Bangladesh's strongest lobbyist in India at this moment.

Back to Hasina's curt reply to Mishra and what happened after that. Mishra's elephantine ego was hurt. Unlike Basu or Mukherjee, he had no idea of Hasina's strong sense of nationalism, her very Bengali sense of pride. So he activated Jyoti Sinha, then one of RAW's top three officials, to touch base with the BNP. The services of intelligence officials are only used when politicians and diplomats don't have direct contacts with leaders of neighbouring countries. Why should Jyoti Basu or Pranab Mukherjee use RAW to contact Hasina! They would keep these spies at arm's length because they prefer one-to-one discussions and often would not want Delhi to know beforehand.

But Mishra wanted to 'fix' Hasina. RAW station chief in Dhaka Amitabh Mathur, Tony to friends, was activated. He managed to set up close ties with BNP through Tarique Rahman. After the Awami League lost the 2001 polls, Tarique was escorted by Tony Mathur to Delhi and Mumbai for meeting Indian leaders and Reliance's Ambani brothers (yet to be separated). The Ambanis were taking much interest in importing Bangladesh gas with US company UNOCAL pushing for a pipeline. The BNP, which believes Indian support is important for Hasina and Awami League, managed to pull off a coup. Whether Tarique promised, on behalf of his mother, to export gas to India, is something I am not privy to. But he might have made some tactical gesture to give Indians confidence. Later the Ambanis lost interest in Bangladesh gas when a huge deposit was found in the Krishna

Godavari basin down south. UNOCAL executive Ron Summers continued to try but Hasina would not budge. Hasina has never forgiven Mishra and RAW officials who worked on his orders to befriend the BNP. The Awami League still recall Mishra's 'not all eggs in one basket' statement during his rushed visit to Dhaka to congratulate Khaleda Zia on her 2001 victory. But senior BJP leaders like Tathagata Ray publicly attack Mishra for his pro-Khaleda policy and describe it as a disaster.

Even in 2014, when Hasina was fighting with her back to the wall, India, China and Russia decided to bail her out by coming out in support of the elections as 'constitutionally necessary'. If BNP, which stood a great chance of winning the polls, did not participate and resorted to massive street violence, it was their leader who snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Khaleda Zia, possibly on Mozena's advice, played her cards wrongly. It was evident who gives more importance to these small time diplomats and intelligence officials masquerading as one.

Just to recall, India took on the US hard and heavy - Indian envoy Pankaj Saran pulled up US envoy Dan Mozena very heavily over a breakfast - because it was upset with the US diplomats projecting India as their strategic partner and supporting them on a change of regime in Bangladesh. The strip-search on Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade in Washington and Indian decision to retaliate by withdrawing security to US embassy in Delhi were widely believed to be the fallout over severe disagreement between Delhi and Washington over Bangladesh. Mirza Fakhrul would betray a very poor sense of understanding of how the Indian system works if he credits RAW with helping Hasina out in 2014. RAW would surely inform Delhi about the situation on ground in Bangladesh but it was Indian political and diplomatic leadership, especially then National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon on direct instructions from PM Manmohan Singh and President Pranab Mukherjee, who took the lead in defending the Hasina government's decision to go ahead with the elections. President Pranab Mukherjee had a major role in shaping Indian policy and Khaleda Zia did not help her cause by cancelling her scheduled meeting with Mukherjee during his Dhaka visit. Like the US, India is a big populous democracy and it always helps if a foreign leader has strong backers in Delhi because that helps influence policy.

But if one recalls the Indian and the Chinese reactions, the statement out of Delhi

was muted and defensive, when it described the polls as a 'constitutional necessity', while the Chinese welcomed Hasina's return to power and said, "Sino-Bangladesh relations will touch new heights under her able leadership". Why did that happen! Since Khaleda was seen as strongly supported by US and the West, the Chinese worried their BCIM plans will suffer if she came to power. India subtly used the Chinese concerns to get support for backing Hasina. National Security Adviser Menon, with strong Chinese contacts, managed to win over

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changes in her policies - "As a friend of India, like my father, I will address all your concerns, but don't tell me how to run my country".

That was the beginning of her problems with Mishra who had Vajpayee's ears. During the first part of her 1996-2001 term, Hasina had pulled off the Ganges waters accord and the Chittagong Hill Tracts accord by using the services of the late Jyoti Basu, then West Bengal chief minister but very powerful in the United Front government. In fact, Basu had been offered prime ministership but his party CPI (M) had refused. Basu not only piloted the Ganges waters agreement but also influenced Indian policy on Chittagong Hill Tracts. Home Minister Indrajit Gupta, a fellow Bengali and Communist, listened to Basu and pushed the RAW to call off its backing to PCJSS-Shanti Bahini. That left Santu Larma with no options but to come back and sign the 1997 CHT agreement. And when Hasina sent her foreign

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