



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivering his speech on March 7, 1971

The birth of Bangladesh and nationality question in South Asia

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26 March 1971 is a significant date in South Asian subcontinent not simply because Bengali majority of Pakistan decided to assert a right to secede in the face of brutal military crackdown but also because the very fundamental framework of the parameter of nation formation in South Asian subcontinent had been altered. In South Asia anti colonial nationalism had been premised upon the idea of religious nationalism. Lala Lajpat Rai, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwarkar and other Hindu nationalists openly asserted the primacy of religious identity in the process of nation formation in colonial India. Lala Lajpat Rai even proposed

tor of nationality question in South Asia though not ignoring, the role of religion as a crucial factor in shaping national culture too.

In the Muslim world too, such deeper attachment to linguistic identity had been prominent in postcolonial moment after the first world war. Indeed, Kemal Pasha turned his back on the Ottoman Empire and its legacy because such complex mosaic of ethno-linguistic communities who cohabited such premodern imperial entities undermined the principle of linguistic nationalism. Similarly, in Persia there existed a deeper sense of emotional belonging to ethnolinguistic community. Correspondingly, postcolonial Arab nationalist movement under the leadership of Nasser or Bath nationalists highlighted linguistic identity rather than religious identity. Even today, Palestinian national liberation struggle remained invested in Arab identity encompassing both Muslim and Christian Palestinians. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world, there exists a deeper awareness of regional culture of the archipelago encompassing pre-Islamic heritage without denying Islamic religious identity. Indeed, one of the burning issues in the middle east today is that of Kurdish question whereby major middle eastern powers deny Kurdish language speakers the idea of nationhood. Thus Bengalis, who constituted the second largest Muslim population after Arabs in the Muslim majority world, and third largest linguistic group in Asia after Han Chinese and Hindi-Urdu speakers, actually followed dominant trends in Muslim majority world in their quest for political modernity.

Like Nasser's Arab nationalism, the postcolonial democratic upsurge in the majority world came in long 1960s. The term 'long 1960s' is conceptualized by Arthur Marwick in the context of what he calls a 'cultural revolution' in Germany, Italy, and France, as well as the United Kingdom and the United States. [Arthur Marwick, "The Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties: Voices of Reaction, Protest, and Permeation," *International History Review* 27, no. 4 (2005): 780-806] The significance of this term lies in the acknowledgement that the 1960s cannot simply be studied as that time which passed between a pair of historical bookends, that is, 1960 through 1969. Rather it has to be studied in terms of the shared objectivity of a particular historical moment that stretched beyond, but incorporated, events in that decade. The long 1960s in East Pakistan began in 1954 with an election that took place in the context of a spasmodic and rickety consti-



'The Muslim League has been routed in the East Pakistan elections,' Dawn, 1954.

tutional process. It was this constitutional process that led to the gaining of a modicum of political power by the politicians of the Awami League. This brief flirtation with 'power' in the Pakistani state led to a split in this pivotal local autonomist organization over questions of Cold War alignment. For a brief period, when Awami League supremo Suhrawardy was the Prime Minister, Pakistan joined the US-backed military blocs of the Baghdad Pact and SEATO. The decision to join such military pacts was guided by the security-related concerns of the emergent military-bureaucratic ruling class in Pakistan, but the League's active support of such a decision led to an internal schism. Radicals, which included both communists, and non-communist socialists such as Maulana Bhasani, questioned the necessity of a political alignment that violated the basic principles of non-aligned movement. More importantly, these radicals felt that when political actors and emerging national-liberation struggles in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world opposed such military blocs, then it was imperative that Pakistan too stay away from such formations. Ultimately, these radicals formed a rival political organization, namely the National Awami Party (NAP), based upon a program of opposition to 'imperial' alignment. The close connection between Cold War military-political alignments, and the rise of a pro-western, supposedly 'modernizing' military junta in Pakistan, defined a critical parameter of politics of the long sixties.

This parameter was the general tendency to question the cultural politics of national integration championed by military-bureaucratic regimes. It was also a period marked by growing peasant protests and labour and student militancy in Pakistan. All of these movements co-



Kagmari Conference, Tangail, February 1957. From left to right, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Bhashani and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy.

alesced around an opposition to the capitalist modernization process, which had increased inequity along class, regional, and ethnic lines. These protests were also matched by a deeper social transformation marked by ethnic cleansing, capital flight from the eastern province, the changing dynamics of class formation, the immiseration of the peasantry, and the narrowing down of the democratic possibilities of accommodation. Over the course of these years there arose a period of 'the high sixties', in 1968-69, marked by students, workers and peasants openly revolting against the military-bureaucratic power edifice. Globally, in the twentieth century, the years around 1968 and '69 became what 1848 was to Europe in the nineteenth century.

In the East Pakistani context, the idea of internal colonization and the idea of "national liberation" that lent such rhetorical power to Sheikh Mujib, and made Bengali nationalism a new post-colonial force. Bengali nationalism had also sought to explore how other Third World intellectual, political, and cultural currents shaped the sentiments, strategies, and tactics of building post-colonial cultural identities. In East Pakistan in 1968-69, among the socialist-leaning, but purely Bengali-nationalist 'Nucleus' circle established by Sirajul Alam Khan and Kazi Aref, the texts of Che Guevara, Debrey, General Giap and Mao were prescribed as essential readings. For these nationalist student-revolutionaries, there was much romance to be found in the idea of a Bengali nation-state heralding an exploitation-free society. More broadly speaking, the empowerment of the Third World itself served as a driving force towards the realization of Bengali political aspirations. For the Left, the pursuit of "national liberation" required rupturing the compact of U.S.-foreign

policy and the Pakistani military junta. The Left also made the stranglehold of the military-sponsored financial oligarchs over Pakistan's national resources a point of contestation. As a consequence, the rhetoric of national liberation in East Pakistan, in its more radical forms, envisioned the absolute recuperation of national resources, the elimination of oligarchic control over national resources, complete sovereignty in international relations, particularly in relation to Pakistan and India, and the forging of a "national consciousness."

Thus an internationalist social political consciousness powered by revolutionary decade of 60s geared Bangladesh towards a national liberation struggle. The rest was history. The sweeping victory of Awami League in the first general election of Pakistan, the non-violent non-cooperation launched in the face of military intransigence to transfer power to elected representatives and finally the military crackdown and the liberation struggle paved the way for a new Bangladesh that remained free from baggage of colonial equation of religion with nationality. The sad fact that many of the promises of the revolution of Bangladesh did not fructify should not blind us to celebrate the wider significance of liberation struggle and national democratic revolution of Bangladesh.

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An emotional Mukti Bhanu guerilla hugs his companions when the cease-fire between the Bangladesh-India allied force and Pakistani troops is announced on December 16, 1971. This paves the way to the independence of Bangladesh. PHOTO: ABBAS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

the reorganization of boundaries of colonial Punjab on the basis of religious distribution of population long before colonial government considered the idea of partition. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, an ardent modernizer, who devoted his life to secure the rights of religious minorities within democratic constitutional framework, gave up the arduous struggle and argued for recognizing religion as fundamental premise of national identity. After securing Pakistan, he again called for the establishment of a secular state. Gandhi and Nehru, who were principal votaries of composite nationalism, implicitly acknowledged that religion constituted the core of nationality question in colonial India. The liberation struggle of Bangladesh actually brought into salience the issue of language as a critical denomina-