

# THE BIRTH OF A NATION: MRS GANDHI & INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

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India's role in Bangladesh Independence movement has been considered as a highly provocative one by some leaders of the developing as well as the developed countries. In the opinion of some experts on international affairs political advantage as well as concern for human rights and self-defence prompted India's action. Many people in India and other nations regarded India's action as heroic. Many changes have taken place in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, since Bangladesh emerged as a nation in 1971. There are many issues between India and Bangladesh to be resolved to secure greater stability in the area. Indo-Bangladesh amity is possible only when Bangladesh observe greater respect for human rights and India adopts a more flexible policy in her relations with Bangladesh.

The Indo-Pakistan war of December 1971 and the liberation of Bangladesh form a watershed in the recent history of the sub-continent. These two inter-related events not only drastically transformed the power balance in the sub-continent, they also radically altered the state structure in South Asia that had resulted from the agreement between the British government, the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

India and Bangladesh are close door neighbours and much interaction between the two is visible in the politico-socio-economic and cultural fields. The sovereign independent republic of Bangladesh was created in 1971 with the active moral and material support of India after the dismemberment of Pakistan. The emergence of a new country in South Asia had changed the entire situation because this fact has challenged certain fundamental assumptions regarding South Asian realities which the most political observers of the South Asian scheme accept. The entire concept of balance of power in the sub-continent which meant essentially military parity between India and Pakistan was discredited. The balance also tilted in favour of India and this compelled the super powers to revise their postures towards India. It was felt that China would change its attitude towards India and the United States would also move towards her.<sup>2</sup>

The dismemberment of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh changed the whole situation in South Asia. Since the emergence of Bangladesh, the relations between the two countries were of brotherly type upto August 1975. The Government of India under the stewardship of Mrs. Indira Gandhi played a memorable role in the emergence of Bangladesh, diverted its resources sincerely in order to build the completely wrecked Bangladesh economy and social set-up and was the first to recognise it as a sovereign independent country.

Bangladesh is surrounded by Indian territory except for a short South Eastern frontier with Burma and a southern coast fronting the Bay of Bengal. About 85% of the population speak Bengali, the state language, the remaining Bihari and some Hindi. The principal religion is Islam but there is a small minority of Hindus.

The modern state of Bangladesh emerged as East Pakistan, one of the five provinces into which Pakistan was divided at its separation from the British India in 1947. East Pakistan and the four western provinces were separated by 1,000 miles of Indian territory. Dissatisfaction in East Pakistan at its dependence on a remote central government flared up when Urdu was declared Pakistan's official language in 1954, and in 1955, Pakistan was recognized into two wings, east and west with equal representation in the Central Legislative Assembly.

As far as the role of India in the liberation struggle of Bangladesh was concerned, it was based on certain principles. Mrs. Indira Gandhi who was the prime Minister then watched the whole scene with patience and used every weapon from her armoury to bring about a political solution of the issue. The statements issued from time to time by the Indian leaders and the material help which Indian Government started rendering to the people of Bangladesh can be cited as a clear evidence of Indian government's intentions, i.e., the unity and integrity of Pakistan.

The struggle for power in Pakistan started after the first ever general election held in Pakistan in 1970. The Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) swept the polls in West Pakistan while in East Pakistan the Awami League had its upper hand. According to democratic norms and traditions President Yahya Khan should have transferred the power to the Awami League but it seems he was not in a mood to surrender power and started creating hurdles. These acts of President Yahya instigated PPP Chairman Z.A. Bhutto to raise hue and cry against Sheik Mujibur Rehman, the would be Prime Minister of Pakistan.

During the military rule of Field Marshal Ayub Khan (1958-69) discontent continued in the Eastern wing over the small part it had in Pakistan's army and in commerce. Sheikh Mujibur Rehman became the leader of the Awami League, which called for autonomy for the Eastern wing. He was imprisoned in 1966 and released at the fall of Ayub Khan in 1969. The first ever general elections on the basis of the adult franchise were held in Pakistan in December, 1970 and gave the Awami League a majority in Pakistan's National Assembly.<sup>3</sup>

**Mujib Era:** The emergence of Bangladesh was a major historical incident which occurred in the Indian sub-continent; after the Second World War and it affected the power balance in the sub-continent. The People's Republic of Bangladesh is surrounded by Indian Territory except for a short South-Eastern frontier with Burma.

The dismemberment of Pakistan after Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 helped in boosting India's image in the world as a supporter of genuine liberation struggles. The reasons for Indian interference in Pakistan's

internal affairs were manifold, and the genesis of this problem lies in the historical past. The root cause of Indo-Pakistan trouble is that India never accepted the establishment of Pakistan.<sup>4</sup>

When on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1971, Pakistan imposed war on India, the latter under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, moved its armed forces into East Pakistan and with the help of Mukti Bahini liberated East Pakistan from the clutches of the West Pakistani military junta.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1971, when the war was in full swing the Government of India granted recognition to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, while announcing the decision Mrs. Indira Gandhi further said that in future the governments and people of India and Bangladesh, who share common ideals and sacrifices, would forge a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in the internal affairs, equality and mutual benefits.<sup>5</sup>

After the recognition, the first chancery of Bangladesh was formally opened in New Delhi on 9th December, 1971, when its green and golden flag was unfurled. Between the formal recognition and the opening, a movement was launched in East Pakistan against the delaying tactics of President Yahya and the circumstances compelled Mujib men to declare the sovereign republic of Bangladesh.

After the declaration, Pakistan's army on the orders of President Yahya started butchering the people of East Pakistan. Millions of people from East Pakistan took shelter in India which resulted in shattering Indian economy and social system. The Indian government provided food, clothing and-shelter to these refugees and also tried its best to create conditions for their safe return to Bangladesh. The then Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the External Affairs Minister, Swaran Singh toured the world and pleaded for the political solution to the problem and safe return of the refugees. This effort of Indian leaders cleared various doubts from the minds of the peoples of the world regarding India. India also raised the issue in the United Nations and other international forums.

The leaders of Pakistan in their speeches described Indian action as an act of interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan. The Pakistan government also issued a white paper in which it tried to link the so-called Agartala conspiracy case with the crisis in Bangladesh. It further stated on 7th December, 1971 that the two countries had entered into a number of agreements, covering the vital fields of defence, foreign relations and trade. The Defence agreement, while pleading India's help to Bangladesh in its struggle, made it clear that after the liberation of Bangladesh the armed forces of India would not undertake any other function. In the agreement on foreign relations, the two countries reasserted their allegiance to Pancha Sheel and non-alignment.

By another agreement India decided to give at least Rs.100 crores immediately to Bangladesh for undertaking a massive programme of reconstruction. Both the governments also finalized a detailed agreement which envisaged an annual trade of Rs. 1,000 crores.<sup>6</sup>

To strengthen the relations with India, the foreign minister of Bangladesh, Abdus Samad Azad, paid on official visit to India from 5th to 9th January, 1972. He said that his government would follow the policy of non-alignment and both the governments agreed to base their relations on the principle of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, and equality and mutual benefit.<sup>7</sup>

Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh on the invitation of the Mrs. Indira Gandhi paid a visit to India from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> February, 1972. Both the leaders (India and Bangladesh) agreed that Indian forces would withdraw from Bangladesh by 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1972, and every means would be adopted to ensure the return of all refugees from India. They also expressed their determination to promote, in every possible way, co-operation between governments and people of the two countries inspired by a vision of lasting peace, amity and good neighbourliness.<sup>8</sup>

After the withdrawal was completed, Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi landed at Dacca on 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1972. At the airport in a brief speech in Bengali, Mrs. Gandhi emphasised that whatever help India had given to Bangladesh was in pursuance of its own ideas and not for ulterior motives. The two Prime Ministers decided that there is a need to take concrete steps by the appropriate agencies of the two governments in order to strengthen cultural relations between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> The visit of Mrs. Gandhi to Bangladesh further strengthened the Indo-Bangladesh relations.

**Indo-Bangladesh Treaty:** On the lines of Indo-Soviet Treaty of peace, friendship and co-operation, signed in August, 1971, on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1972, India and Bangladesh signed a 25 year treaty of friendship, co-operation and peace. It was signed by the Prime Minister Sheik Mujibur Rahman and Mrs. Gandhi and it committed the two countries to immediately enter into mutual consultations to take appropriate effective measures to eliminate the threat in case either party was attacked or threatened with an attack. The treaty was not a defence pact between India and Bangladesh, as is clearly evident from Article 9 which provided only consultations and other measures to check the threat and not the automatic interventions. Indo-Bangladesh treaty of co-operation, friendship and peace determined to maintain fraternal and good neighbourly relations and transform the border into a border of external peace and friendship.

**India, Pakistan and Bangladesh:** After the liberation of Bangladesh, Government of India in order to establish the identity of Bangladesh and legitimize its role during the liberation war, associated Bangladesh in the talks with Pakistan on the prisoners of war issue.

The Simla agreement was welcomed by Bangladesh and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh strongly supported its objectives of reconciliation, good neighbourliness and establishment of durable peace in the sub-continent. The Government of Bangladesh took the plea that in the absence of recognition by Pakistan it was not possible to have tripartite talks to settle the humanitarian problems as Bangladesh could not participate in such a meeting except on the basis of sovereign equality. But on 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1973, India and Bangladesh took a major step with the intention of ending the deadlock on the humanitarian issues by

setting aside the problem of recognition.<sup>10</sup> In February 1974, recognition of Bangladesh took place which facilitated the participation of Bangladesh in the tripartite meeting envisaged on the Delhi Agreement.

**Growing Friendship between India and Bangladesh:** After signing of the Indo- Bangladesh treaty, the friendship between India and Bangladesh started growing day by day. To strengthen the bonds of friendship, the President of Bangladesh Abu Sayeed Chowdhury arrived in New Delhi on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1972, on a ten day state visit. The President of Bangladesh had expressed "profound gratitude" to the government and the people of India for their open hearted generosity and assistance during and since the war of independence of Bangladesh.<sup>11</sup>

In response to the invitation by President of Bangladesh, the President of India, Mr.V.V. Giri paid a five day official visit starting from 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1974 and addressed a special session of the Jatiya Sangshad (Parliament) on 18th June. He underscored the need for co-operation between India and Bangladesh. He said that only through co-operation the two neighbours can face up to external pressures and changes in the world.<sup>12</sup> A joint communiqué issued on 19 June at the end of President Giri's visit, high-lighted the bonds of friendship between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> From time to time India and Bangladesh governments held bilateral discussions in order to sort out the differences that emerged on various issues of international situation and on problems of mutual interests.

**Summit Conference May 1974:** The summit conference of India and Bangladesh started on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1974, in order to thrash out various questions which would help to strengthen "very friendly relations" existing between the two countries. The Bangladesh observers described the summit meeting as a milestone on the road to the sub-continent peace realised on the basis of sovereign interests.

The summit conference covered almost all the aspects of Indo-Bangladesh relations. On the very first day Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Sheik Mujibur Rehman met and their talks covered the sharing of Ganga waters, trade between the two countries and sub-continental affairs. The agreements concluded had reflected that the conference was a great success. The most important agreement was of course the border agreement.

The coup in Bangladesh on 15 August, 1975, ended a golden period of Indo-Bangladesh relations. In the coup, Sheik Mujibur Rehman was killed, his government was over thrown and a new regime under his cabinet colleague Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed was established in Bangladesh.<sup>15</sup>

Indo-Bangladesh relations during Sheik Mujib era were quite friendly. India not only actively helped Bangladesh in the liberation struggle, but after the emergence of independent Bangladesh, it stood firmly with the government of Bangladesh in the task of building an already destroyed economic, trade and social set up, by providing liberal loans and grants and signing various trade agreements. Mujib era was a golden period in the history of Indo-Bangladesh relations. It was the Indian efforts which compelled Pakistan to recognise the Government of Bangladesh and respect the wishes of the people of Bangladesh.

**Post-Mujib Era:** After the murder of Shiek Mujib, political uncertainty prevailed in Bangladesh and a number of coups followed. The Indo-Bangladesh relations in the post-Mujib era were more or less governed by the domestic compulsions of Bangladesh. At the domestic front, political instability and economic crisis dominated the scene. Trade between the two countries was on the decline. The political elite of Bangladesh tried to make political gains by raising the Muhirchar and New Moore Island controversies. Their main purpose was to divert the attention of the people from domestic miseries. These irritants no doubt, spoiled the relations between India and Bangladesh.

**Farakka Barrage Dispute:** The Farakka Barrage dispute which was a source of tension between India and Pakistan, before the emergence of Bangladesh, has been generating tension between India and Bangladesh. Even before 1971 several attempts had been made both by India and Pakistan to solve the issue. The efforts continued after 1971 and because of cordial relations between India and Bangladesh, the dispute would be settled. Some understanding on the issue was reached after various meetings between India and Bangladesh representatives which resulted in the signing of an agreement in November, 1977. Both the countries were satisfied with the agreement in the beginning but later domestic and political conditions in both the countries changed and there was a talk of scrapping the agreement.

As far as the 1977 Agreement is concerned there is a need to revise it because it has been established that the agreement was signed without keeping in mind the experts' opinion and the national interest of India.

**Farakka Issue and the United Nations:** The issue was raised by the government of Bangladesh in the United Nations by writing letters dated 21<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> August and 8 September, 1976, addressed to the Secretary General and requesting the inclusion in the agenda of the General Assembly's thirty first session of an interim "situation arising out of unilateral withdrawal of Ganga waters at Farakka."

On 24<sup>th</sup> September, the General Assembly on the recommendations of its general committee, decided to include the item in its agenda and allocate it to the special political committee for consideration. This step was opposed by India. Both Bangladesh and Indian governments were provided with an opportunity to present their views.

Bangladesh decision to withdraw the issue' from the United Nations and the consensus reached by the special political committee were welcomed in India. The Times of India described it as "a vindication of its consistently reasonable approach to the issue." The United Nations decisions had provided another opportunity to Dhaka to discuss the issue with New Delhi in a spirit of realism and fair play.

**Janata Government and the Farakka Dispute:** The Janata Party which came to power after march 1977 general elections decided to strengthen India's relations with her immediate neighbours and was aware that Farakka dispute was alive and without its solution the relations between India and Bangladesh could not become cordial. The Government of India therefore, speeded up the negotiations on the barrage issue and

made fresh efforts to arrive at an overall settlement.

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 1977, the two countries arrived at comprehensive long-term and short-term agreements on the sharing of Ganga waters. The 1977 agreement was an improvement over the interim government of April 1975. After the fall of Janata Government, Mrs. Gandhi once again succeeded in capturing power and was critical of the 1977 agreement. The Government of Bangladesh was also not satisfied with it.

The points in dispute between India and Bangladesh are of two categories: (1) those rousing passions temporarily, such as the storm over New Moore Island and the border wire fencing on the Assam border, (2) those with long range implications such as the Farakka water dispute and sanctuary for insurgent groups in North-East India.

The items of the first category are generally orchestrated whenever a political group interested in discrediting the ruling establishment in Bangladesh used it for domestic purpose. In the case of the second category the providing of sanctuary to insurgents from North-East India has gone down considerably in recent years. Farakka, however is a complex issue, made worse by neglecting to treat it for years at the political level.

Relations with Bangladesh improved rapidly during Janata period. The Janata regime recognised the legitimacy of the post-Mujib regime in Decca, signed with it a five year agreement on the waters of Ganga, and assured it that Pro-Mujib elements would not be allowed to carry on their activities against the Bangla regime from the Indian bases.

**Evaluation:** With the moral and material support of the Government of India, the emergence of independent Bangladesh became possible. The dismemberment of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh had changed the power structure in the Indian sub-continent. Following the liberation of Bangladesh its relations with India remained very close for a few years. In fact, in the very first year, Sheik Mujib himself enthusiastically went in for signing a treaty of friendship with India.

During the period of Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the interaction between the two countries in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres were in full swing. The Martial law proclamation issued soon after take over by General Ershad on March 24, 1982, indicated the priorities of the new regime in respect of foreign policy as follows:

1. Good relations with neighbours.
2. Regional co-operation in South Asia.
3. Adherence to the United Nations Charter.
4. Friendly relations with Islamic countries, and
5. Unity and solidarity with the third world and non-aligned nations.

International response to the Bangladesh crisis was conspicuous by its absence. The big powers were concerned about the balance of power and not with the protection of human and political rights of the people of East Pakistan. The third world countries were not prepared to take concerted action when their interests were not directly involved. The international response to the Bangladesh crisis demonstrated that maintenance of territorial integrity has priority over the protection of human rights.

Indo-Bangladesh amity is essential for the maintenance of peace and stability in the sub-continent and the world. Historical, ideological and personality factors are obstructing the development of cordial relations between these countries. Co-operation in economic and cultural spheres helped the emergence of harmonious relations between these countries. It is difficult to assess the role of India in the crisis in the sub-continent. The merits of the role of India in the Bangladesh independence movement can be determined only in the long run, whether it has contributed to peace and stability in the region or the otherwise.

A number of factors are active in the determination of the interaction between India and Bangladesh. India had always been friendly towards Bangladesh and made a number of gestures concerning the Farakka issue in the hope of strengthening the bonds of friendship. The anti-Indian and pro- Pakistan lobby which got encouragement from the ruling elite after the murder of Sheik Mujibur Rehman, left no stone unturned in instigating the people of Bangladesh against the Indian government. Their propaganda had made the people of Bangladesh of suspicious nature concerning their country's interaction with India. During Sheikh Mujib's regime both the Governments signed a number of agreements and treaties. The Indo-Bangladesh Treaty, The Indo-Bangladesh boundary Agreement and Interim Agreement on the Farakka Barrage are a few among them.

After the murder of Sheik Mujib, a number of governments tried to control the country. Among them President Zia-Ur-Rahman was considered to be a successful person. The political instability in Bangladesh is responsible for complicating the bilateral issues existing between the two countries. The New Moore Island controversy and the Farakka Barrage problem are the two main areas where both the governments have opposite view points. But these issues are not as complicated as are sometimes projected by the leaders and Prime Ministers of both the countries. It would not be wrong if we blame both these factors for playing adverse roles for their selfish interests in deteriorating cordial atmosphere that was existing in the beginning when Bangladesh got independence.

There is a need to create proper atmosphere for the solution of the problems and it would be beneficial for both the countries if they prefer to maintain brotherly relations. In 1977 when political climate was changed in India the Janata Government wanted to strengthen the relations with the neighbours. The agreement on Farakka signed in 1977, though bilateral in nature, failed to satisfy both the governments and after the re-emergence of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Government of India demanded the revision of the agreement.



Mrs. Gandhi continued good neighbourly relations with its immediate neighbouring countries. The basic principles of foreign policy remained unaltered.

Relations with Bangladesh improved rapidly during the Janata regime. It 'recognised the legitimacy of the post-Mujib regime in Dacca, signed with it a five year agreement on the use of Ganga waters, and assured it that pro-Mujib elements would not be allowed to carry on their activities against Bangladesh from the Indian bases. After the re-emergence of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1980, the Congress government continued good neighbourly relations with its immediate neighbouring countries.

At present, the ruling dispensation under Awami League is favourably disposed towards India and is trying to have cordial relations with it, however, the opposition led by the BNP leader Khalida zia is opposing cordial relations with India staunchly. The reason must dawn both on both the countries that having healthy relations between the two countries is in their best interests as well as in the interests of the region.

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