



Article Type: Review Article

Article Ref. No.: 200217119N1AYSA

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0202-a013>



## ANTI-INDIAN FACTIONS IN BANGLADESHI POLITICS (1971 – 2014): A BRIEF SURVEY

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### Abstract:

India played an active role in the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. The relation between the two countries remained cordial in the initial years but it soon soured with the *coup d'état* of 1975. This also marked the rise of the anti-Indian elements in the Bangladeshi politics. This article makes a brief survey of anti- Indian elements that has remained a part and parcel of the political fabric of Bangladesh since 1971. It also looks into the ways in which the anti-India stance has been instrumental in garnering popular support to hold on to political power.

The article begins with the background of the creation of Bangladesh and India's active role in it which was followed by the friendship treaty signed between the two countries. Then it moves to the changing scenario following the *coup d'état* of 1975 which marked the visible changes within the polity of Bangladesh. The nature of nationalism underwent change moving from secularism to a religious character which found expression in the policies of the state. The military rule most often found it convenient to use the anti-Indian stance in order to please the fundamentalist elements of the country in its bid to garner popular support. Even after the restoration of democracy, the anti-Indian factions remained active in opposing the government of Sheikh Hasina's foreign policy with regard to India. Radical religious factions, who had throughout opposed the liberation war, still play a major role in fanning the anti-Indian sentiments in Bangladeshi politics.

**Article History:** Submitted on 17 Feb 2020 | Accepted on 13 Feb 2021 | Published online on 31 May 2020

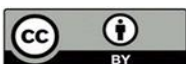
**Keywords:** South Asia, Islam, Radicalism, Secularism, Democracy

### 1.0 Introduction:

Decolonization in South Asia resulted in redrawing of borders in the Indian subcontinent. With Jinnah's Two Nation theory<sup>a</sup> holding ground, the major imprint that the partition left upon the history of Indian subcontinent was the creation of India and Pakistan (BBC, August18, 2017). While Pakistan took up the identity of an Islamic republic India took up secularism<sup>b</sup> as one of the chief characteristics (with democracy and republican forms of government as the other two major characteristics of the state). However, the religious basis of the formation of Pakistan resulted in the curious case of having a nation in two parts - West and East Pakistan, with secular India lying in between and separating the two (Talbot, 1999). As power remained concentrated in the hand

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of those at helm in West Pakistan the economic, linguistic and identity based issues formed the basis of discontent in East Pakistan (Mishra, 1972, pp.2 and 32-33). However, the victory of Awami League, a political party in East Pakistan, in election held in 1970 was ignored (O'Donnell, 1984) which resulted in further political discontent coupled with the cultural issues, chiefly, the language policy of imposing Urdu over Bengali which had been a major issue of discontent (Umar, 1979). The opposition to the heavy-handed nature of the west Pakistani leadership over the Bengali identity of the East Pakistani population resulted in brutal repressive measures unleashed by the leadership in West Pakistan. This finally resulted in the uproar of demand to create an independent state of Bangladesh, free from the clutches of the Pakistani domination (Sisson and Rose, 1990, pp. 35-174).

India played a major role in the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971, by providing both political and military assistance to the 'Muktijoddhas'. However, India's participation in war had its own reasons. Ideologically, it hammered the idea of 'Two Nation' theory based upon which Pakistan was born. Geographically, it neutralized the threat of dealing with Pakistan on two fronts. Diplomatically, it forged the strength of India to provide assistance to freedom aspirations in its immediate neighbourhood in terms of providing logistics, training, manpower and technology (Murshid, 2011).

However, the relation between India and Bangladesh since the latter's independence had its ups and downs. The anti-India faction in Bangladeshi domestic politics made its presence felt ever since the birth of the nation. It became more and more evident following the coup d'etat of 1975. Even though the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina tried to maintain cordial relations with India, Hasina herself had to face the flak and criticism from the radical Islamist elements from time to time. The BNP led by Khaleda Zia had remained extremely critical of relation with India.

## **2.0 Scope of the article:**

This paper tries to look into the anti-India factions in the Bangladeshi politics. The article traces the anti-India elements from the days of the creation of the state of Bangladesh and how the anti-India stance has been used as a leverage to gain support in the domestic politics of Bangladesh.

## **3.0 Tracing the anti-Indian factions in Bangladeshi politics:**

During the war, India proved to be the strongest and closest ally of Bangladesh. This earned for India the friendship of Bangladesh, resulting in the signing of the treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace between neighbours in March 1972, during Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister's first visit to Bangladesh (Ali, 1973). There have often been complaints that India had pressurized Bangladesh into signing the treaty but it was Mujib who insisted on doing so (Ali, 1973). Article 9 of the Indo-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty (MEA, March 19, 1972), provided for mutual consultations between the two signatories to remove a threat if either was attacked. However, the clause did not limit this to an "external attack." Therefore, it might be argued that this "attack" could also apply to any attempt to capture power in Bangladesh by any quarter hostile to India, using means other than political. In such a situation, the treaty could be invoked and Indian troops could be invited back into Bangladesh (Hossain, November, 1981).

The initial years (January 1972-August 1975) represented a period of good equation between the two countries. Two basic elements of state policy -the use of religion for nation-building and

external support for regime stability did not find any place in the policies of Bangladesh during the leadership of Mujibur Rahman.

Involvement of military in politics made inroads following the *coup d'état* in August 1975 and Revolutionary Command Council was formed. There was a clear cut policy of moving away from the policy of friendship with India.<sup>d</sup> The anti-India sentiment which was harboured by the political groups<sup>e</sup> long before the coup took place, provided support to the General Ziaur Rahman to become the president in 1977(Karlekar, 2005). His rule highlighted two major shifts. Firstly, the declaration of difference between Bengali Nationalism and Bangladeshi Nationalism which tried to show the difference between the Bengalis of Bangladesh and those of India. This found expression in the replacement of the slogan "Jai Bangla" with "Bangladesh Zindabad". Secondly, stating religion i.e.; Islam as the basis of national life in Bangladesh (Franda,1981). It was completely opposite of secularism which had been mentioned in the constitution of 1972.

Under his rule, Bangladesh tried to diversify its international patrons. With the flowing of Saudi aid they tried to distance India as far as possible. One of the major issues that had been a major factor in the bilateral issues, the river water sharing issue, was taken to the U.N. which enabled them internationalize the issue and was used by Zia to secure his position in power through the anti-India tirade (Crow,1995). However, the next military ruler, Ershad preferred to follow a moderate approach while dealing with India. However, there was bargaining in matters related to river water issues between 1983 and 1987(Ahmed, 1995, p.95) (Crow, 1995, pp.112-118). Although India was interested in the proposal of having permanent arrangement of sharing water of rivers that flowed through both countries, but Ershad was not in a position to follow up as he faced countrywide opposition which was threatening his position in power. Under such circumstances, he had to follow a policy of appeasement by pleasing the anti-Indian lobby. This was clearly portrayed when the Chinese authorities were assured that Bangladesh would not allow its territory to be used by Indian military on the occasion of Sino-Indian conflict (Mahanty, 1984 & Mahapatra, 1988).

The 1990s saw the end of military rule with the coming of the democratic practices in Bangladesh. The decade saw the bitter factionalism within the political fabric. Sheikh Hasina's accession to power and her intentions to prosecute war criminals resulted in instigation of a mutiny in the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) which nearly resulted in the overthrow of her government (Kumar, October, 2009). However, such an attempt failed and Sheikh Hasina managed deal with such a threat (BBC News, February 26, 2009). Her policy to act against insurgents and terrorists who were using Bangladesh as a base to launch operations against India, and measures to deal against Islamist radicals drew flak from the radical Islamist elements of Bangladesh (The Economic Times, December 1, 2009). The busting of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) modules and those of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) and the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) annoyed the anti-India factions in Bangladesh which openly criticized her for providing special leverage with regard to India (Kumar, March 16, 2009). The Jamaat which specifically identified such activities as a way to allow Indian forces into Bangladesh, and threatened that any such move would be resisted. Though the presence of Indian military in Bangladesh was a figment of the Jamaat's imagination, such anti- Indian elements kept no stone unturned in order to incite the common masses in its attempt to capture power.

In January 2010 Hasina's trip to India saw the signing of the joint communiqué. The anti-India faction comprising mostly of the Islamic parties labeled it as a sell-out, and to be against Bangladeshi interests (The Hindustan Times, January 20, 2010 & bdnews24.com, January 17, 2010).

The granting of transit to India was also highly criticized by the anti-India faction of Bangladesh which included Jamaat-e-Islami, though no concrete decision was yet to be taken by either of the countries.

The anti-Indian faction comprising of the Islamic fundamentalists, is least interested in the actual contents of deals, pacts or understandings which were signed between the two countries. Their chief agenda remains opposition to any form of close co-operation between India and Bangladesh. For them, the idea of close relationship with India is antithetical to their idea of Bangladeshi foreign Policy. For them, any closeness with India might prove detrimental to Bangladesh's relationship with China and the Islamic world as India was making close ties with the US and Israel (Hashmi, January 22, 2010).

While dealing with the anti-Indian elements of Bangladeshi political panorama, it can very well be argued that political parties can be classified on the basis of their attitude with regard to India. The BNP has defined its nationalist credentials as being anti-India (Rana, February, 2019) (Karlekar, 2003). The Jamaat too is anti-India as it desires to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh (Akhtar, July 8, 2011). The Awami League could be classified as India-friendly in its approach (Chakma, 2015). The issue of India plays an important role in garnering support during elections as the radical Islamic factions always engage in anti-India tirade and thereby propagating their concocted anti-India fantasy. However, the 2014 election was a little different as the Shahbagh movement had a major impact upon the elections. The Shahbagh movement was a nationalist and secular movement that emerged after the International Crimes Tribunal-2 (ICT-2) sentenced Abdul Quader Molla, a Jamaat leader who was held guilty for war crimes during the 1971 Liberation War, to life imprisonment (The Daily Star, February 6, 2013). The movement demanded capital punishment for this particular war criminal (BBC News, February 8, 2013).

In the political circle the prevailing notion was that the Liberation War sentiments were no longer strong and radicals/Islamists like the Jamaat-e-Islami had greater appeal and acceptability in society and polity (Riaz, 2007).

But the Shahbagh movement was able to revive the emotional attachments with Liberation War. It familiarized the youth with the earlier misdeeds of the Jamaat. The Jamaat, the BNP and the Hefajat-e-Islam in their attempt to discredit the Shahbagh movement branded its leaders as anti-Islam and atheist and played the religious card and tried to show that Islam was in danger. However, after the conclusion of election Sheikh Hasina came to power and formed the national government.

#### **4.0 Conclusion:**

Looking back at history since the Liberation war of 1971, it would be too simplistic to wonder why such anti-Indian emotions run strong within the fabric of the country which India had helped so much in its journey to freedom. The reason for such apathy and hatred can be traced back to the very history of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The religious basis of 'Two Nation' Theory based upon the fabricated history of supremacy of Islam over the infidels in the medieval era coupled with the imagined phobia that the secular forms of government would mean subjugation of Muslims in the hands of the Hindus, have fanned the anti-Indian sentiments which still identifies India as a nation of Hindus. The idea of secularism remains a panacea for the radical Islamic elements that have time and again shunned modernity and have tried to emulate the mythical 'golden age' of Islam.

Bangladesh despite having high aspirations is yet to come out of its religious baggage as illiteracy and poverty provide the breeding grounds of such fundamentalist elements which propagate a complex concoction of myth, lies, imagination, and desire to control a large mass of uneducated populace which would not question but obey every command in the name of religion. Even after the liberation, religious fundamentalism still plagues the fabric of the nation.

#### End Notes

<sup>a</sup> The following speech given by Muhammad Ali Jinnah clearly sums up his idea of Two-Nations. In the All India Muslim League presidential address delivered in Lahore, on March 22, 1940, Muhammad Ali Jinnah explained:

'It is extremely difficult to appreciate why our Hindu friends fail to understand the real nature of Islam and Hinduism. They are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders, and it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has troubles and will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures. They neither intermarry nor interdine together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspect on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Mussalmans derive their inspiration from different sources of history. They have different epics, different heroes, and different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other and likewise, their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built for the government of such a state.'

<sup>b</sup> According to Christophe Jaffrelot,

'In contrast to most south Asian countries, modern India has always been officially "secular", a word the country inscribed in its Constitution in 1976. Secularism, here, is not synonymous with the French "laïcité", which demands strong separation of religion and the state. India's secularism does not require exclusion of religion from the public sphere. It implies recognition of all religions by the state. This philosophy of inclusivity finds expression in one article of the Constitution by which all religious communities may set up schools that are eligible for state subsidies. India's secularism, therefore, has more affinities with multiculturalism.' (A skewed secularism?, *Hindustan Times*, May 15, 2011, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-view/a-skewed-secularism/story-MfUza7MZxVWxuUXJlvZQ6J.html>)

<sup>c</sup> Two coups took place in 1975. The first one took place on August 15, 1975 which resulted in the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The second coup took place on November 3, 1975, which resulted in Ziaur Rahman capturing power.

<sup>d</sup> This is very well portrayed through the writings (the book is called *Muktir Path* (Road to Freedom) published from Dhaka in 1984) of two leaders namely- Colonel Sayed Abdur Rashid and Colonel Sayed Firok Rahman where they glorified the men involved in the coup. Their justification lay in the fact that the men involved had saved their nation from the clutches of Russo-Indian expansionism.

<sup>e</sup> There were basically two groups which harbored the anti-India sentiments. On one hand there were the religious parties which had been banned due to their collaboration with the Pakistani elements in 1971, and on the other were the leftist groups (with the exception of the communist party of Bangladesh and National Awami Party). While the anti-India outlook stemmed from their identification of India to be the lackey of 'social imperialist' USSR, the religious parties had an anti-India stance and were campaigning themselves as the defenders of Islam in Bangladesh. However, their common issue was the removal of Awami League from power.

<sup>f</sup> *Jai Bangla* which meant "Hail Bangla" was first used as a slogan by Mujib during the 1971.

<sup>g</sup> *Bangladesh Zindabad* meant "Long Live Bangladesh".

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