

# Liberation of Bangladesh: Role of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister of India

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## ABSTRACT

The liberation of Bangladesh and its subsequent creation as an independent State is an epoch making event in the history of South Asia in particular and the world in general. The British colonial masters while leaving the shores of India truncated the subcontinent into two sovereign States namely, India and Pakistan. Pakistan was not one single monolithic contiguous entity but it had two geographical expressions, East Pakistan and West Pakistan. These two regions were divided by Indian territory by nearly 1000 miles. There was animosity between these two branches of Pakistan because the people of West Pakistan dominated the people of East Pakistan in all aspects and as a result, there was a lot of hard burn in the people of East Pakistan. The election of 1971 was the last straw on the camel's back. The Awami league under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman won the election, but the Pakistani leadership under General Yahya Khan and Z.A. Bhutto refused to hand over the reins of government to the Awami league party. As a result, there was a revolt in East Pakistan by Mukti Bahani (freedom fighters) and they were supported to the hilt by the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi and she has contributed immensely to the liberation of Bangladesh. The present research article is a narrative of the role played by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in liberating Bangladesh.

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## 1. Introduction

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was awarded the 'Bangladesh Freedom Honour', the highest state award given by the Government of Bangladesh for foreigners and non-nationals posthumously on 25 July 2011.<sup>1</sup> The award was given to her for her role as an ally during the Bangladeshi war of independence and her capacity to manage such a complex regional conflict. A Bangladeshi national committee had nominated her for the special honor for her "unique" role in offering training to freedom fighters and for giving refuge to millions of Bangladeshi nationals who fled the country and for building the world public opinion for the sake of independence for Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> The daughter-in-law of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, the President of Indian National Congress received the award from the Bangladeshi President Zillur Rahman at the grand ceremony in Dhaka.<sup>3</sup> The Bangladesh National committee was cognizant of the fact that Mrs. Indira Gandhi stood by the side of the people of Bangladesh from the beginning of the Liberation War despite many adversities and she had provided shelter to about 10 million Bangladeshi refugees who were running away from the atrocities that were being perpetrated by the Pakistani army. She also made untiring efforts to free Sheikh MujibarRehman from the Pakistani jail.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs.Indira Gandhi was criticized by some of the leaders in both the developed and the developing countries for her role in the liberation of Bangladesh and it was treated to be highly provocative. Some of the political thinkers connected with international affairs were of the opinion that apart from the political advantages that India wanted to accrue from the liberation of Bangladesh, self defense and human rights for the Bangladeshi citizens were also the reasons for prompt Indian action for supporting the cause of the Bangladeshi people. Many people in India and some of the nations the world

regarded India's action as heroic in terms of helping Bangladesh to take birth as an independent nation among the comity of nations. Many changes have been heralded in not only in India and Pakistan but also in Bangladesh, ever since it emerged as an independent nation after the Indo-Pak War in 1971.

The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 was a defining moment in the Indian subcontinent because it not only made Pakistan eat a humble pie but also resulted in the liberation of Bangladesh from the clutches of the military junta of West Pakistan. These two interconnected events, apart from drastically transforming the power balance in the subcontinent also altered radically the state structure in South Asia.<sup>5</sup>

India and Bangladesh share a common border and as a consequence there is much interaction between these two South Asian Countries in political, social, economic and cultural fields. With the active material and moral support of India, the sovereign, independent Republic of Bangladesh was created in 1971 subsequent to the dismemberment of Pakistan. The emergence of Bangladesh as independent nation has changed the entire situation because it altered certain fundamental assumptions pertaining to South Asia with regard to the balance of power in the subcontinent. The balance of power tilted in favor of India and this made the super powers of the day namely, USA and USSR to revisit their postures towards India. It was felt that both China and America would make radical shifts in their attitude towards India and try to move closer to it.<sup>6</sup>

Since the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent sovereign nation in South Asia the relations between the two countries were quite friendly and fraternal till August 1975. The Government of India under the aegis of Mrs. Indira Gandhi left no stone unturned to strive sincerely in order to develop the Bangladeshi economy which was completely dilapidated because of the excesses that were conducted by the Pakistani

generals of West Pakistan. In fact India was the first country to recognize Bangladesh as a sovereign independent country.

Bangladesh is enveloped by Indian Territory on all sides except for a short South Eastern Frontier with Myanmar and the southern coast facing the Bay of Bengal. A predominant majority of the Bangladeshi citizens speak Bengali which is the State language and the remaining people speak Hindi and Bihari. A preponderant majority of the population practice Islam which is the State religion while a small majority of people practice Hinduism.

When the British colonial masters bifurcated the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, the modern State of Bangladesh which was called the East Bengal was one of the five provinces that formed Pakistan. While four provinces were located in West Pakistan, the East Bengal was the only province which was lying far-flung from West Pakistan and was separated by 1000 miles of Indian Territory.

Developments in Pakistan from 1969 to 1971 led to the breakaway of the East Pakistan from Pakistan and to the emergence of Bangladesh as a Sovereign and independent State. These developments resulted in much hostility in Pakistan towards India, culminating in a war with India from 4-16 December 1971.

Even before 1969, we ought to note that the people of East Pakistan had begun to feel that they were being exploited by West Pakistan. The population of East Pakistan was some 75 million, whereas that of West Pakistan was some 60 million, i.e. they were a majority in Pakistan as a whole, being more than 55% of the population. But they had not received their due share in decision-making in the Government of Pakistan; no truly democratic Constitution had been evolved for the whole State. From 1958 to 1972, effective power laid with the military regime (Ayub Khan ruled from 1958 to 1969) supported by the army, the bureaucracy and the feudal and business aristocracy. It was pointed out by many scholars that all senior members of the military administration were West Pakistanis, and of the senior officers in the Central Services, 87% were West Pakistanis in 1960.<sup>7</sup> East Pakistan's share in the army was some 10%, with very few Bengalis in senior positions such as that of Lieutenant-General.

A report by a panel of experts to the Planning Commission of the Government of Pakistan provides authoritative documentation of the widening of economic disparities in the two regions.<sup>8</sup> The comparatively greater progress of West Pakistan was clearly due to the economic policy of the Government of Pakistan which used the major share of its public investment funds (plus foreign aid) to the development of West Pakistan. The East Pakistan had a majority of the population, East Pakistan's share of Central Government expenditure was as low as 20% between 1950-51 and 1954-55 attaining a peak of 36% during the Third Five Year Plan period (1965-66 to 1969-70).<sup>9</sup> Further, the foreign trade earnings of the East Pakistan were utilized to finance imports for West Pakistan. Until 1962-63, East Pakistan has shown significant surpluses on foreign account and in contrast, the foreign trade of the West Pakistan has shown a substantial and chronic deficit that has absorbed virtually all foreign exchange made available through foreign trade.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to that there was the language question. In March 1948, the Governor-General of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, had declared at Dhaka that Urdu will be the sole official

language of Pakistan resulting in widespread protest against it in East Pakistan. It was not until February 1952 that the Government of Pakistan conceded to Bengali, in theory the same status as that of Urdu: in practice, however, the cultural claims of Bengali were neglected. It is relevant to note that Ayub Khan in his broadcast on 21 February 1969 stated that "people of East Pakistan believe that in the present system, they are not equal partners and also they did not have full control over the face of the province"<sup>11</sup>

In 1969 there was widespread popular discontent in the East and West Pakistan and this compelled the military ruler, Ayub Khan to pass on power to General Yahya Khan in March 1969. He promised to conduct general elections and kept his word. In the elections that were held on 7 December 1970, on the basis of universal adult suffrage, Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, secured an absolute majority, with 167/169 seats allotted to East Bengal in the National Assembly whose total strength was 313; it polled 72.26% of the votes cast in East Bengal. Mujibur Rehman and his party Awami League had fought the elections on the basis of a six-point programme whose essence was autonomy (not independence) for the East Pakistan.

In the normal course, the leader of the majority party would have become Prime Minister but sinister forces were at work and the normal expectation was not fulfilled. The National Assembly, scheduled to meet on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, was not summoned; protracted negotiations took place among Yahya Khan, Z.A. Bhutto (leader of the Pakistan People's Party in West Pakistan) and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. In the meantime, an event of some significance took place on 2 February at Lahore: an Indian Airlines aircraft, which had been hijacked to Lahore, was blown up; the Pakistan authorities failed to take action in accordance with the United Nations Resolution on aerial hijacking; India was compelled to ban over flights of Pakistan's aircrafts over Indian airspace.

The negotiations between Yahya Khan, Z.A. Bhutto and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman failed. It was believed that Yahya Khan had entered into negotiations with Mujibur Rahman as a pretext to find time to move two divisions of his army to East Pakistan to reinforce the strength of his army in East Pakistan to enable him to crush the autonomy movement. The negotiations broke down on 25 March 1971; from the night of 25<sup>th</sup> March began a reign of terror in East Pakistan, the like of which, according to unbiased accounts, had not been witnessed in history. The personnel of East Bengal Regiment and East Pakistan rifles, whom the Pakistani army tried to liquidate, formed the nucleus of the 'Mukti Bahini' (Freedom Fighters). The resistance movement spread. The declaration of Independence was made from Chittagong radio in the name of Awami League on 26<sup>th</sup> March. The Pakistan Army replied by resorting to killing, raping, burning and looting on a large scale. Mujibur Rehman had in the meantime been arrested and kept in prison; the Awami League was outlawed; the freedom of press and civil liberties were suppressed, and all foreign journalists were expelled from East Pakistan. The terrified people ran, in their millions, across the border to India. By December 1971, according to the statement of Mujibur Rehman, some 3 million East Bengalis had been butchered, including several intellectuals; some 10 million refugees had crossed over to India. The conscious of the whole world was shocked.

The public opinion in India was shocked by the atrocities perpetrated upon unarmed and innocent people of East Pakistan. On 31 March 1971, the Parliament of India expressed "its profound sympathy for, and solidarity with the people of East Bengal in the struggle for a democratic way of life" and called upon "all peoples and governments of the world to take urgent and constructive steps to prevail upon the Government of Pakistan to put to an end immediately to the systematic decimation of people which amounts to genocide." The people of East Bengal were assured by Mrs. Indira Gandhi that "the struggle and sacrifice will receive the wholehearted sympathy and support of the people of India."

The foreign office in Islamabad had summoned the Indian High Commissioner and informed him that the "Pakistan Government deplored the totally unwarranted resolution" adopted by the Indian Parliament pledging the wholehearted sympathy and support of the people of India to the people of Bangladesh; it was according to the government of Pakistan an interference by India in the internal affairs of Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> The object of diplomacy, after Parliament declared its unequivocal support to the people of Bangladesh, was to mobilize world opinion against the wanton killings and destruction in Bangladesh; and to persuade the nations, especially the major powers, to intercede with Pakistan to find a practical solution which was political in nature to the problem. Thirteen ministerial delegations visited 70 countries to explain the crushing burden imposed by Pakistan and India. Only by these measures could the flow of refugees be stopped and refugees already in India could return home with safety, dignity and honor.

The Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi herself undertook journeys to Soviet Union, Belgium, Austria, the United Kingdom, the United States, France and West Germany. She emphasized, in the course of a discussion with the leaders of these countries, the need for the Pakistani military regime to settle with already elected leaders of East Bengal. "While her stand was appreciated by enlightened opinion throughout the world", says a government report, "Governments were either unable or reluctant to reverse the course of events in peaceful and humanitarian direction"<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile in East Bengal, developments of far-reaching significance were taking place. On 14 April, 1971, the elected leaders of the National Assembly proclaimed the formation of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh and called upon the people of East Bengal to wage a war of liberation against the Pakistani Occupation Forces. Large areas were liberated from military yoke, and local administration was set up in those areas by the Provisional Government. On 17 April, a meeting was conducted at Mujibnagar, the members of the Provisional Government, including the acting President and the Prime Ministers, ratified the Declaration of Independence and the proclaimed the birth of the Republic of Bangladesh.

The war of liberation continued.

The Pakistani Army was massed on the Indian border; many border violations and border incidents took place. There was persistent shelling from across the border and some civilians were killed and others were wounded. On 24 November, Pakistan declared a state of emergency; on 25 November General Yahya Khan announced that he would be fighting off a war in 10 days; "Hate India" campaigns were intensified.

On 3 December 1971 surprise attacks were launched on Indian airfields along the frontier in Punjab, Pakistan and Jammu Kashmir. On 4 December, the Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi told the Lok Sabha: "this morning, the Government of Pakistan has declared war on us"<sup>13</sup> She further added, "Today we are fighting to safeguard the territorial integrity and the national honor. Above all, we are fighting for the ideals we cherish and the cause of peace." Events moved rapidly. The Government of India, on 6 December 1971, accorded recognition to Bangladesh. The war was fought on two fronts, the Eastern on the Western. With the brilliant coordination of its army, navy and air force, India was able, in cooperation with the Freedom Fighters of Bangladesh, to defeat the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh and on 16 December 1971 the Pakistani forces in Bangladesh surrendered. In the Western sector there was fighting on the borders of Jammu Kashmir, in Punjab and in Sind. Mrs. Indira Gandhi offered a unilateral ceasefire; on the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> December, India's offer was accepted by Pakistan and with effect from the same day, the mutual ceasefire came into effect.

According to the Ministry of Defence, at the end of the war, India was holding 479 sq.kms. of territory across the 1948 ceasefire line in Jammu & Kashmir. In Punjab, our forces held at 373 sq. miles of Pakistani territory and in Kutch 476.5 sq. miles of territory. In contrast, Pakistan had occupied 52.57 sq miles of Indian territory in Chhamb sector of Jammu and Kashmir; 68.70 sq. miles in Punjab and one square mile Rajasthan.<sup>14</sup>

Within a few weeks of liberation, the conditions of law and order which prevailed in Bangladesh were such as to inspire confidence among the refugees; and they began to return to their motherland. The means of transport and communication were also soon improved, with the help of the Indian army, and over 9 million refugees, it is reported, were able to return in some 11 weeks.<sup>15</sup> Nearly 90,000 prisoners of war had surrendered and they were transported to India. With the organization of the security force in Bangladesh, and with its essential tasks performed, the Indian Army was withdrawn by 12 March 1972.

The peace talks between India and Pakistan commenced on 28 June 1972 at Simla. While the Indian side was represented by Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Pakistani side was appointed by the Prime Minister, Bhutto. The Simla agreement between the two countries was signed on 3 July 1972. The essential principles of the Agreement may be summarized thus....

Resolving that the two countries put an end to the conflict and confrontation that had till then marred their relations and that they should work for a friendly and harmonious relationship and the establishment of a durable peace in the subcontinent, India and Pakistan agreed:

1. That the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations should govern the relations between the two countries.
2. That the two countries are resolved to settle their differences by peaceful means through bilateral negotiations or by any other peaceful means mutually agreed upon by them. Pending the final settlement of any of the problems between the two countries, neither side shall unilaterally alter the situation both shall prevent the organization, assistance or

encouragement of any acts detrimental to the maintenance of peaceful and harmonious relations.

3. That the prerequisite for reconciliation, good neighborliness and durable peace between them is a commitment by both the countries to peaceful coexistence, respect for each other's integrity and sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.
4. That the basic issues and causes of conflict which have bedeviled the relations between the two countries for the last 25 years shall be resolved by peaceful means.
5. That they shall always respect each other's national unity, territorial integrity, political independence and sovereign equality.
6. That in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, they will refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of each other.<sup>16</sup>

It was also agreed that steps should be taken (i) to resume communications including postal, telegraphic, sea, land and air; (ii) to provide travel facilities for the nationals of the other countries; (iii) to promote trade and cooperation in economic and other agreed fields; and (iv) to promote exchange in the fields of science and culture.

Finally, Indian and Pakistani forces were to be withdrawn to their side of the international border; both countries were to respect the line of control in Jammu and Kashmir resulting from the ceasefire of 17 December 1971 and the withdrawals of the forces referred to above should be completed within a period of 30 days commencing from the coming to the force of the Agreement.

As it is to be expected, India's relations with Bangladesh have been cordial in the initial years. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has several times express the gratitude of the

Government and the People of Bangladesh to the Government and the People of India for the hospitality and assistance given to millions of Bangladesh citizens in their hour of need and for the moral and material support given by the Government and People of India in the struggle for freedom.

As an initial help to the war ravaged economy of Bangladesh, the Government of India made a grant of Rs. 25 crores for the purchase of a greatly needed commodities including food, petrol and petroleum products, fertilizers, cotton, sugar, salt, cement and steel. A loan of Rs. 10 crore was made for rebuilding the railway network in Bangladesh. Another loan of US\$ 5 million in foreign exchange was also given to meet the immediate needs of Bangladesh in foreign exchange.

On the invitation of the Government of India, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh visited Calcutta from 6-8 February 1972. On the invitation of the Government of Bangladesh, the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi visited Dacca from 17 to 19 March 1972. The occasion was utilized for the signing, on March 19, of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace between India and Bangladesh. After affirming their adherence to nonalignment, peaceful coexistence, mutual cooperation, non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, the two States agreed to "enter into mutual consultations in order to take appropriate effective measures" in case either party was attacked or threatened with the attack. Besides, it was also decided to strengthen economic and cultural context.

Finally, reference must be made to a decision made by the Prime Ministers- mentioned in the joint declaration signed by the two Prime Ministers on 19 March 1972- to establish a joint River commission comprising experts of both countries on a permanent basis to carry out a comprehensive survey of the river systems shared by the two countries and formulate projects in the fields of flood control and to implement them. This concrete decision helped in the initial years to cement the bonds of friendship between India and Bangladesh.

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