

## ORAL HISTORY

### *Birth of Bangladesh: Down Memory Lane*

*Arundhati Ghose, often acclaimed for espousing wittily India's nuclear non-proliferation policy, narrates the events associated with an assignment during her early diplomatic career that culminated in the birth of a nation – Bangladesh.*

**Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ):** Thank you, Ambassador, for agreeing to share your involvement and experiences on such an important event of world history. How do you view the entire episode, which is almost four decades old now?

**Arundhati Ghose (AG):** It was a long time ago, and my memory of that time is a patchwork of incidents and impressions. In my recollection, it was like a wave. There was a lot of popular support in India for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his fight for the rights of the Bengalis of East Pakistan, fund-raising and so on. It was also a difficult period. The territory of what is now Bangladesh, was undergoing a kind of partition for the third time: the partition of Bengal in 1905, the partition of British India into India and Pakistan and now the partition of Pakistan. Though there are some writings on the last event, I feel that not enough research has been done in India on that.

**IFAJ:** From India's point of view, would you attribute the successful outcome of this event mainly to the military campaign or to diplomacy, or to the insights of the political leadership?

**AG:** I would say it was all of these. Everything was geared towards a particular objective, which served India's strategic interest. At the same time one must recognize that it was essentially a civil war in Pakistan, where the Bengalis, at least most of them, suffered a great deal and, were fighting for their existence.

**IFAJ:** Was it our precise military campaign?

**AG:** It was basically the political direction – though military and diplomatic tools were used.

**IFAJ:** Could you elaborate what were our strategic objectives?

**AG:** Clearly, the objective was primarily to help the refugees who had streamed across the border to return. The moral, political and financial aid to those fighting for their freedom escalated into war when the Pakistanis attacked our airports in the north. I do not believe our involvement had Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan as an initial objective. It sort of became inevitable.

Let me, however, start at the beginning. I was a junior officer in the Ministry of External Affairs, an Under Secretary dealing with Nepal at the time. I was aware of the happenings in East Pakistan and was interested, like everyone else, in the developments. A lot of sentiment and emotion was involved! One day in May 1971, I was summoned by Joint Secretary Ashok Ray who, without preamble, asked me if I spoke Bengali. On being assured that I did, he instructed me to leave for Calcutta (now Kolkata) immediately. It was a bit of a jolt, as I was not really prepared for any such move. What had happened, apparently, was that the Ministry, looking for a junior Bengali-speaking officer to work with Ashok Ray in the Branch Secretariat in Calcutta had found that the other Bengali officers available in Delhi were unwilling to move to Calcutta. Reluctantly, they settled on me. I, of course, had no problems, as my mother and brother were in Calcutta at the time.

The crackdown by the Pakistan Army on East Pakistan started on 25 March 1971. I moved to Calcutta only in May that year, and initially my task was anything but exciting. We were first accommodated by the West Bengal Government in two rooms in its Secretariat in Writers Buildings. I still remember the monster mosquitoes there! Then a building was requisitioned for the Branch Secretariat and it had to be staffed with security-cleared persons. My memory of the time is that it was all rather slapdash. Subsequently, I was posted to Dacca (now Dhaka) in January 1972. I didn't go back to Delhi.

**IFAJ:** What was the task of the Secretariat during those days?

**AG:** Apart from Joint Secretary Ashok Ray, who I recall spent much of the time in Delhi, there was an outstanding officer from the BSF, a Mr. Chattopadhyay, and support staff. In general, our job was to liaise with the Mujib Nagar Government, the Bangladesh government-in-exile. I was, of course, only a foot-soldier, rushing around carrying messages – I had a subaltern view, so to say. One of the tasks was to coordinate with the Bangladesh Government the

defection of Pakistani-Bengali diplomats who wished to leave their posts in Pakistani Missions abroad. The task was to ease their “transfer” and ensure their security without breaking diplomatic protocol and the laws of the countries where these diplomats were posted. It was tricky, but our Missions had been briefed on how to handle these cases.

**IFAJ:** Precisely what was the strategy to deal with these defecting Bengalis?

**AG:** Normally, as I remember, a Bengali-Pakistani diplomat would indicate his wish to defect to the Indian Mission through some intermediary. As they found themselves becoming more and more uncomfortable in the Pakistani Mission – Bengalis were apparently being treated with suspicion and excluded from much of the work of the Mission – messages were sent, whichever way they could, to the Indian Mission. On receiving the name from the Ministry, I had to get it cleared with the Bangladesh Government authorities. Subsequently, the diplomat and his family would be assisted in leaving that country for some safe destination as he could not very well go to Dacca. I also had dealings with the Bangladesh authorities to try and help them in the myriad problems that they faced logistically and, in acting as a channel to Delhi.

I was also a carrier of messages from Delhi to the Bangladesh Government, and had occasion to interact with their President, Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Home Minister Kamruzzaman, Minister Mansur Ali, Foreign Minister Khondaker Mushtaque Ahmed, and Foreign Secretary Mahbub Alam Chashi. If there was one issue on which they all agreed, it was the urgent need for India to recognize Bangladesh. I had no idea why there was a delay – one can guess in hindsight – but one had to reassure them of India’s support on a continuous basis. Recently, I met the then Cabinet Secretary, Towfiq Imam, now an adviser to the Prime Minister. One recalled the old interactions, but unfortunately, only briefly, given his tight schedule in Delhi.

Another job related to clearing and, sometimes helping the rather aggressive foreign press that wanted to cover the “story”. Our own journalists were not only more understanding but were better informed. I recall particularly some American journalists who wanted to cross the border and report on the Mukti Bahini. You will remember the US had been extremely hostile to India at

the time, so it was a bit sticky on occasion. I had to engage with the Military Press Office after they had been cleared by Delhi. One particular and very charming journalist, Sydney Schanberg, tried to cross the border without clearances. I had to work to get him out of a local jail!

Obviously, we were involved in the overall coordination effort – MEA, IB, Special Branch, RAW, the Government of West Bengal, Military Intelligence – it all works so smoothly in a time of crisis!

Another task, which grew out of the situation, was to deal with young Awami League leaders who later assumed high positions – Tofail Ahmed, Abdur Razzak, Sheikh Moni (Mujib's nephew) – this acquaintance helped later when I was posted to Dacca. At the time, we even helped them financially – very modest amounts, though larger amounts were being spent in financing the entire establishment. I didn't receive or disburse any large amounts, though I was aware of money kept in a safe in my room.

**IFAJ:** How large was the sum?

**AG:** I was not aware of the actual amounts.

Let me give you an example of the kind of work we were called upon to do – the flavour of the job, as it were. On 15th or 16th December [1971], I was informed by General Jacob that the surrender of the Pakistan Army was to take place at Dacca and, that he was leaving by helicopter in a few hours. He invited Ashok Ray to accompany him. At almost the same time, I received a call from Delhi from the Ministry giving me an urgent task. I had been tracking the course of USS *Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal from the Straits of Malacca. I was to get the President and the Prime Minister to sign a declaration declaring Bangladesh's territorial waters. This declaration was to be read out over the Bangladesh Radio at 3 p.m. and, half an hour later, by All India Radio. I had about four hours to complete the job. When I informed Secretary Banerjee (who was impatiently issuing these instructions to me) that Ashok Ray was going to Dacca for the surrender ceremony, I was told to get my priorities right! The surrender could take place without my help!

Of course, we didn't have mobile phones then. Getting through to Delhi was a major operation. I had also to inform Ray's wife that he had gone to Dacca, had to draft the declaration, get Tajuddin Ahmed to sign it, disturb the Bangladesh President at lunch and get his signature, get to Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (Free Bangladesh Radio), explain and convince them of the need

to broadcast the declaration on time and then do the same with All India Radio. No television. With the incomparable help of Chattopadhyay, we managed to touch all bases on time – but alas! Bangladesh Radio broadcast hours after All India Radio had already carried the news. What impact this had on the Americans I have no idea; being a legalistic people, we needed all points covered legally!

This incident, by the way, affected me for many years to come. India, a non-nuclear weapon state, was being threatened by a nuclear-armed aircraft carrier. With what – attack? I am still convinced that at least in part, this incident led to our first nuclear test in 1974. Anyway, it was one more job.

**IFAJ:** Would you think that the public opinion was hyped up? How Mrs. Gandhi or the Indian Government succeeded in building up such a strong public opinion which we have never seen before or after?

**AG:** As I said at the beginning, it seemed as though there was a wave of pro-Bangladesh feeling, especially among the people of Calcutta. It is strange how the romance of the idea of the Bangladeshis fighting for their language, culture, for their freedom inspired people. After all, this was before television – and we have seen the impact the electronic media have had in Kargil, Mumbai 26/11, and so on. Yet, public opinion was roused to support the Government's actions as possibly rarely before – after all, East Pakistan was seen as enemy territory, East Pakistanis as enemies of India. The terrible carnage of partition seemed to have been, if not forgotten, at least put aside. Mujib's speech at Ramna Maidan in Dacca declaring freedom was played over and over again in public meetings and rallies held in support of Bangladesh, certainly in Delhi and Calcutta.

**IFAJ:** Would you agree that the rise of narrow nationalism during the mid-1980s took the place of such strong public opinion in favour of creating Bangladesh? This may have been a generational change; or may be, deep down in our hearts, despite hatred, there is the idea that what has happened is beyond our control.

**AG:** The romance died fairly early. In any case it was probably artificially created. While I was in Dacca, I recall watching our customs officers at Dum Dum Airport being extra severe with Bangladeshi passengers. On my objecting, I was told, "But they carry pipe-guns." This in a state where the effects of Naxalism were still felt. I also remember, during the Mujib Nagar days, looking for housing for the many Bangladeshi VIPs. There were difficulties persuading

landlords, both Muslim and Hindu, to rent out their premises – even when we threatened to requisition them! The reason, they usually said, was that they were Pakistanis! It was not all sweetness and light, so a massive PR job must have had to be done to get ordinary people to support the cause of Bangladesh. This was, of course, in the initial days. Soon that changed. I have no idea how it was done.

**IFAJ:** How about the Government of Bangladesh in Exile in Calcutta?

**AG:** They had their Cabinet and their Secretariat at Mujib Nagar. They were preoccupied not only with dealing with the current situation – after all, their leader Mujib was in jail somewhere in Pakistan, and one didn't know exactly where he was – there was no certainty about the future, they were dependent on Indian hospitality and support. Nixon's US was backing Pakistan, as was China. At the same time the leaders at Mujib Nagar appeared to be getting ready to govern an independent country. There was a strong sense of dedication to the cause, a kind of determined Bengali nationalism. This must have been there for some years and they seemed to have a fairly clear idea of what they wanted their new country to be.

An interesting anecdote I remember: when the surrender of the Pakistan Army took place on 16 December, D.P. Dhar, who as Chairman, Policy Planning, in the Ministry of External Affairs in Delhi was overall in charge of India's relations with Mujib Nagar, was keen that a delegation from India visit the newly liberated country immediately, even before the Bangladesh Cabinet had moved to Dacca. Finally, better sense prevailed, and the first Indian delegation went to Dacca on 22 December, a day after the Bangladesh Cabinet!

This delegation included people like Sukhamoy Chakravarty and was mandated to examine how much and what kind of economic aid was needed by that ravaged country. The country was in dire straits: there was little or no food, medicines or, even basic necessities. The infrastructure had been all but destroyed. East Pakistani currency had been burnt on the streets of Dacca and other towns and cities, and there was no currency to replace it. The police and armed forces were in disarray and the Mukti Bahini and some other armed groups had not yet been disarmed.

It was decided that depots containing rice, wheat, salt and other necessities would be set up by India around the border on Indian territory and the provisions would be sent to the districts on the basis of demands from the local district

collectors. It worked rather well. Most of the goods were sent by rail. And that led to further problems: wagons were held up and there were a kind of traffic jam in the delivery of this aid. Part of the job I did after being posted to Dacca was to try and return these wagons to India – a major logistic operation. There is no doubt that the aid we gave Bangladesh in the first two years severely disrupted the economies of our north-eastern and eastern states. All this happened over a period, but it was that first delegation that laid the foundations of our aid programme.

During that visit I got an opportunity to experience first-hand some of the brutalities that had been carried out on the Bangladeshis. At a dinner given by Mr. Dhar for all the Indian Army generals and members of the high-level delegation, I was seated at the bottom of the table and a General who had arrived late – I think his name was Sangat Singh – sat next to me but would not eat. He was clearly very upset and he showed me his shaking hands. He had just come from the site where the bodies of many eminent citizens of Dacca had been discovered. Many had their hands tied behind their backs and most had been mutilated. What apparently shook him was the sight of the chopped-off hand of a woman, fingernails painted. This to a battle-hardened soldier was almost unbearable. Some time later, some Bangladeshis showed me a film of that gruesome discovery. (It was strange, the way they felt they needed to show the world – even a junior Indian diplomat – evidence of what they had been through.) I have forgotten much of those early days, but have not been able to get those images out of my mind. It was a horrible sight: dead bodies with sleeveless vests, lungis, pajamas – clearly people pulled out of their houses – were strewn in a pit, face down, some blindfolded. The film showed one man lifting the heads of those terribly gashed bodies to identify each person. A Bangladeshi sitting next to me at the screening kept identifying the bodies – Dr. Rab, the cardiologist, they had cut his heart out – they had gouged eyes, broken teeth, cut off the hands of writers. It was ghoulish and frightening.

I saw the bombed-out remains of a newspaper office – the *People*, I think it was called. And one afternoon, I went to an area of old Dacca – a “Hindu” area called Shakari Patti – the area of conch-shell cutters. The Pakistan Army had blocked both ends of the single road that ran through the *mohalla* and bombed it. The façades of the houses were standing – what was left were actually shells of houses with the insides burnt to ashes. A crowd of women surrounded me and took me up a flight of stairs which rose precariously along a crumbling wall. I

saw the devastation within what remained of the house; the *angan* had a well in which, the women told me, there were bodies of their relatives. Not only could they not honour their relatives by cremating them, but they could not access any water. Across the *angan*, sitting on a wall, were about four or five young men. “They’re Biharis”, they said, “they are the ones who killed our people and they are still free. Tell your Government, tell Mrs. Gandhi about us.” The hatred for non-Bengalis was deep. After I was posted to Dacca, one of the staff members of the Mission was accosted and threatened: he was permitted to leave when he told them that he was a Bengali! Sati Lambah and I used to walk every evening to the Hotel Intercontinental where Mani Dixit (J.N. Dixit) was staying. Sati would be careful not to be speaking, even in English, if we saw a group of Bangladeshis approaching, in case they stopped us and asked us if we were Bengali!

But I am getting ahead of myself. In January 1972 Mani Dixit and Sati Lambah went to Dacca to set up the new Indian Mission. Mani asked me to help with organising the celebration of the first Indian Republic Day in independent Bangladesh. On arrival, I was informed that I had been posted and needn’t bother going back! This led to peculiar situations. Sati and I were staying at the Circuit House but we had no money to feed ourselves! So we would spend a lot of time trying to devise ways to arrange for food! We tried Mani’s expense account at the Intercontinental, *chole bhature* off the streets and milk and bananas from the *khansama* of the Circuit House. Fortunately, our Army was still there and we sometimes got invited to their camps for dinner. Of course, apart from surviving, we were also busy setting up the new Mission. We had moved into the old Deputy High Commission at Segunbagicha – a house I recall as being stacked with furniture that had been left behind when the personnel had been evacuated in a dramatic airlift from Dacca to Calcutta as well as spiders as big as the flat of one’s palm! We soon found new premises at Dhanmondi, a much nicer area, with the help of the Bangladesh Government.

I must add that we experienced the deep affection that most Bangladeshis had for Indians at that time. Unfortunately, it started wearing out fairly soon. Perhaps, we made some mistakes – some large and some minor – that didn’t help. Sheikh Moni, Sheikh Mujib’s nephew and an important Awami Leaguer, used to visit me at the Circuit House to discuss all manner of things.



**IFAJ:** Like what things?

**AG:** For instance, he once complained to me about the Civil Affairs Liaison Officers we had sent to every district in Bangladesh to “help” the district authorities. These were Indian IAS officers who had been posted to Bangladesh, though their mandate was not very clear. He was very concerned and felt that India was being seen as an occupying force rather than a liberating one. They should be sent back, he felt. They did not know the country, the language. And, the young Bangladeshi district collectors were competent enough to deal with the situation. Fortunately for us, the Indian officers were quietly removed from the country.

Another mistake, which I would in hindsight classify as a major mistake, was the way in which we treated Foreign Minister Khondaker Moshtaque Ahmed. During the Mujib Nagar days, there had been reports that he had been trying to get in touch or was in touch with the Americans, apparently to try and arrange some negotiations with Bhutto. It should be remembered that not all Bangladeshis wanted independence from Pakistan. In fact, even Mujib, till very late, used to end his speeches with a “Pakistan Zindabad”. It was Mujib’s arrest and the Army crackdown that forced the Bengali Pakistanis to opt for independence; they had little choice by that time. Many, including Moshtaque Ahmed and (as became known later, Begum Khaleda Zia), were perhaps trying to restore the territorial integrity of Pakistan, I don’t know. Anyway, the “mistake” we made, I believe, was that as soon as the Bangladesh Cabinet returned to Dacca, we apparently pressurised them to get rid of Moshtaque Ahmed and proposed a relatively unknown person, Abdus Samad Azad, from the Bangladesh Communist Party, to replace him. This infuriated our friends in the Awami League, not only because they did not appreciate our interference in their politics, but also because they were not enamoured of the Communists. On the other hand, we made a life-long enemy of Moshtaque Ahmed, a development we would rue in due course. In fact, Ashok Ray once told me that D.P. Dhar was a wrong person to have been put in charge of India-Bangladesh relations. According to Ray, as a Kashmiri politician Dhar was unable to grasp the nuances of Bengali politics.

In a sense, however, the disillusionment was, perhaps, inevitable. After all, the Bangladeshis were Pakistanis who had been brought up on a diet of anti-Indian propaganda. India had been identified to them as the “enemy”; it must have been traumatic for them to have had to turn to the “enemy” for help and succour when their own Army and people turned their guns on them. Let me

give you an example. I was told, after I had been in Dacca for some time, that pre-independence, after Eid prayers at the Baitul Mukarram, the largest mosque in the centre of the city, the priest leading the prayers would ask of the congregation: *Allah hamare dushman ko katl kar de. Hamara dushman kaun hai?* The people gathered would respond: *Hamara dushman Hindustan hai.* [“May Allah finish off our enemy. Who is our enemy?” “India is our enemy.”] Yet, it was to the *dushman* they had to turn in a time of need. Very difficult times, indeed.

At another level, several months after I had been in Dacca, I finally met the “ideologue” of the Awami Youth League, Siraj ul-Alam Khan. A very dedicated, intelligent, intense person. Together with some other younger members, Shahjehan Shiraj and Abdur Rab, they ran a newspaper called *Gana-kantha* (The People’s Voice). Later, they were to break away from the Awami League and form the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal. Anyway, at one of my meetings with Siraj, he articulated what was perhaps the underlying apprehension of most of our smaller neighbours. He said that since Bangladesh was surrounded on three sides by India and the sea on the fourth, all it would take for India to control Bangladesh, should it want to, was *ek thaba* – the strike of a tiger’s paw.

But it was not all doom and gloom, mistakes and distrust. I had been given the job in the Mission of channelling our economic assistance to Bangladesh. (We, too, had our prejudices to overcome.) Since this was immediately post-war, there was a great deal of confusion about who actually took decisions for the incoming aid, and who ensured that it reached the people who had asked for it in the first place. Sometimes it was the Planning Ministry, sometimes the Rehabilitation Ministry, and sometimes the Home Ministry. Using some of the contacts that one had made earlier, one was able to get some kind of system in place. There was also a need to coordinate the aid being offered by different countries. For instance, the Hardinge Bridge had been badly damaged; one span had fallen into the river and the river, in spate, was eroding the opposite bank. The British were interested in repairing the bridge: we asked them if they would remove the span, a very complicated procedure, then we would be able to replace it. It was jointly done, almost through personal rather than inter-governmental contact. We did well, I think, but failed to leverage our aid.

**IFAJ:** What kind of ideologue or socialist was Siraj? Was he closer to being a kind of conventional communist or Marxist?

**AG:** He said he was a “scientific socialist”. Unfortunately, I don’t know what happened to him.

**IFAJ:** Mujib was a man with a variety of ideas and notions.

**AG:** Yes, but he had a single objective – the dignity and freedom of the Bengali people of Pakistan, even within the framework of Pakistan. His dedication to the cause of Bengali nationalism got him an adoring and loyal following in that country. He was a great orator and visionary, but perhaps less of a practical administrator.

**IFAJ:** Was the army moving in its own direction?

**AG:** The army was loyal to Mujib to start with, and there was widespread support for the new government and the Awami League. There was little opposition.

**IFAJ:** There was the Mukti Bahini.

**AG:** Well, after independence, the Mukti Bahini was disarmed – a major task – and absorbed. They set up a unit called the Rakhi Bahini – but these were areas outside my knowledge.

**IFAJ:** They were all sitting in Calcutta?

**AG:** No, the Mukti Bahini actually were fighting the Pakistanis.

**IFAJ:** What about the leadership and strategists?

**AG:** The leadership of the Mukti Bahini was Bangladeshi, though I believe they did get training from us. Certainly, there was coordination with our forces, particularly after the war broke out.

**IFAJ:** How did they get arms? Did they loot them from the armouries of the Pakistan Army?

**AG:** Perhaps. But you mustn’t forget that the East Pakistan Rifles, the Police, etc., – all who were Bengalis – joined the struggle. To the Pakistanis, all Bengali Pakistanis were suspect, so perforce they joined the fight for their existence. It was a civil war on the basis of language and culture – though it had started in reaction to West Pakistan’s refusal to accept a democratic mandate.

**IFAJ:** How many years did you stay there?

**AG:** I went with D.P. Dhar’s delegation in December 1971, got posted in January 1972 and was posted out in July 1973.

**IFAJ:** Was there any opportunity to talk directly or indirectly to Bhutto? Bhutto was also a popular leader, elected, though not yet in office.

**AG:** No. As I have said, it was an internal matter of Pakistan, though when hundreds and thousands of refugees started streaming across the border into India after the military crackdown in March 1971, India took the matter to the international community. There was little official response, though there was a lot of public sympathy. I think that apart from the massive economic burden on India, the government may have been worried that the large numbers and their horror stories could ignite communal trouble in our country. When the Bangladesh Government came across and contacted us, India got more politically involved. So the question of talking to Bhutto or Mujib did not arise, at least as far as I am aware.

**IFAJ:** When the coup took place against Mujib, were you still in Bangladesh?

**AG:** No.

**IFAJ:** But you could see it coming?

**AG:** No, I would be lying if I said I did. There were signs and complaints which were troublesome but a large-scale massacre was not, perhaps, envisaged. There was arrogance and a certain flaunting of power. His older sons were known to have been throwing their weight around, making money corruptly and perhaps, even indulging in violence without any check. I recall one incident which is illustrative. At that time law and order appeared to be fairly weak; cars were taken away by youngsters at gunpoint, and some lonely stretches of road were not at all safe. I was being given a lift home by Kamal, Mujib's eldest son. It was fairly late at night and the car was stopped at a police check post on one such lonely stretch. On being asked for papers, Kamal opened the glove compartment and there was a gun inside. He didn't take it out, but leaned forward and asked the police officers, "Don't you recognize me?" He did resemble his father and the police let him go. It was most mortifying.

**IFAJ:** Do you ever remember some of these Bangladeshi leaders and ideologues sitting together and discussing and envisioning the idea and design of their nation – secular, multi-ethnic, where minorities – both religious and linguistic – everybody would have a place and everybody should be respected?

**AG:** There must have been such discussions, but I was not aware of them. You should read Mani Dixit's book on those early days. My impression was that they intended to be a secular democracy; I had met a Hindu leader called

**IFAJ:** Was the minorities' representative approach present there?

**AG:** Yes, I believe this was an important part.

**IFAJ:** Did you have direct contact with Mujib?

**AG:** Yes, on occasion, mainly accompanying the High Commissioner on official calls. He really was a charismatic figure. One felt the force of his personality as soon as one entered the room.

**IFAJ:** You or any Indian staff ever ran into Ziaur Rahman?

**AG:** Yes, on one occasion that I remember. The Indian Army was still in Dacca, keeping very much to themselves. Sati Lambah and I were at a dinner, speaking to a Brigadier Tom Pandey, when a message was received that a Bangladeshi film director – I forget his name – had been abducted by al Badr or the Razakars – groups of armed “Biharis” which had been set up by the Pakistan Army and which still operated in gangs in some neighbourhoods of Dacca – and taken to a densely populated area known as Mirpur. A small unit of the Bangladesh Army had got these kidnapers surrounded and had asked for the help of some Indian troops. We, Sati Lambah and I, went along with the Indian Brigadier to meet Colonel Zia, who was the Bangladesh commander in charge of the operation. There was apparently both trust and cooperation between both armies at the time, though I believe on this occasion they were not successful in freeing the hostage.

**IFAJ:** How about Ziaur Rahman?

**AG:** He appeared friendly enough. He was fairly young at the time.

**IFAJ:** How did the Army get up the courage to butcher the entire family of Bangabandhu, the Father of the Nation?

**AG:** I have no idea. I had left Bangladesh by then. Clearly, the murderers were subnormal; to kill not just Mujib, his wife, his little son Russell, his son Kamal, his nephew and his pregnant wife – it all seemed so vicious and bloodthirsty. Sheikh Hasina and her sister were out of the country and were saved.

**IFAJ:** But why did they kill Begum Mujib?

**AG:** Because Begum Mujib was a strong personality and could have rallied people around her. Though she was a traditional Bengali housewife, she could have become a political figure. At least that is what I believe.

**IFAJ:** Did you ever happen to meet Khaleda Zia (around 1972)?

**AG:** No.

**IFAJ:** Did you get any specific instruction from the Government of India as to how to deal with the Government of Bangladesh?

**AG:** I was First Secretary in the Indian Mission. We worked under the instructions of the High Commissioner, once he was in place. I was not an independent entity operating on my own.

**IFAJ:** More or less Bangladesh remains a democracy; more or less a multicultural democracy.

**AG:** I believe so – at any rate, now that Sheikh Hasina has won the elections. One had some doubts when the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) was in power. Bangladesh remains important to our security interests. While Siraj ul Alam Khan feared our *thaba*, Bangladesh can also be seen as a dagger pointed at India's soft underbelly.

**IFAJ:** Was he aware of it?

**AG:** I would have thought it was obvious: an unfriendly China to the north and a hostile Pakistan to the south and a narrow strip of India between – very uncomfortable! Friendly relations with Bangladesh are therefore in our strategic interest.

**IFAJ:** Did the leaders of Bangladesh, sitting in Calcutta, imagine or dream of a Bangladesh in strategic terms?

**AG:** I don't think so. They were really concentrating on the survival of their language and culture, their political existence in Pakistan or separation. Geo-strategic issues may have been discussed, but I am not aware of it. They were, after all, in the middle of a civil war that was more or less forced on them by the Pakistanis.

**IFAJ:** The Pakistanis could not understand this dynamics.

**AG:** Obviously not. They seem to be making the same assumptions in Sindh, Balochistan and, with the Pashtuns today. Bengalis are fiercely proud of their language and culture. Denial of equality even when they were in a majority was the breaking point.

**IFAJ:** How about the post-liberation return and rehabilitation of refugees?

**AG:** Most of our aid went to the Government of Bangladesh, whose immediate task was rehabilitation of the returning refugees and the victims of the war – the civil war. But Bangladesh was poor and was not being helped by the international community, at least at first. For the government it was an almost impossible task.

I remember a particular incident. A Delhi-based NGO had sent about Rs. 2 crore (Rs. 20 million) to the High Commissioner to disburse as he felt appropriate. I was instructed to purchase Rs. 2 crore worth of saris and lungis from Calcutta and get them across to Dacca as soon as possible. Chattopadhyay in the Branch Secretariat was still there and he helped me contact mills for the specific kind of saris and lungis that Bengali villagers wear. Unfortunately, I spent all the money on the clothes, quite forgetting that they had to be transported to Dacca! A great deal of persuasion and diplomacy enabled me to get Indian Airlines, which had just started flying to Dacca, to transport the material to Dacca for free. There was a further twist to the tale. Sheikh Moni had tried to persuade us not to hand the clothes over to the government but to distribute them directly to the villagers. The High Commissioner, an upright man if ever there was one, decided to give them to the Rehabilitation Ministry. In a few months, they were found to be on sale in Dacca markets!

**IFAJ:** Is it that West Bengal became tired with the migration issue because of the resources drain, burden of rehabilitation, etc.?

**AG:** I think so, though I have no facts to support my presumptions. I had the impression that the enthusiasm wore off very fast, perhaps because the refugees were not going back, and the schools and clinics where they had been housed were being reclaimed by the locals. Perhaps it was the smuggling that was taking place, but the irritation in West Bengal started growing. On the other hand, the Bangladeshis at that time saw India through the lens of West Bengal. When we opened the reading room of the Mission in downtown Dacca and put our national English-language papers on the shelves, there were loud protests;

the demand was for the Calcutta Bengali papers! I have no idea if this is still the case, but there is no doubt that our border states play an important role in our relations with our immediate neighbours.

**IFAJ:** We were very kind towards the Bangladeshi refugees in 1971–72. But now Bangladeshi migration is a major political issue.

**AG:** I don't know how kind we were. We helped with what we could afford. But there were difficulties, as resistance to the refugee camps grew and some were forcibly sent back to Bangladesh. Economic migration has, I agree, become a political issue, but it is mainly an economic and security one today.

**IFAJ:** Thank you, Ambassador, once again, for sharing such valuable information which is otherwise not in the public domain.

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