

States' woman'ship and Birth of a New Nation in South Asia (Reflections on Smt. Indira Gandhi's role in the emergence of Bangladesh)

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Introduction-birth of a 'New Nation', -a glorious but painful history:

Since the inception of Bangladesh as a People's Republic on December 16, 1971 and so far as the various stages of the anniversaries of its liberation war are concerned, it is perhaps incorrect to say that Bangladesh still does not have an authoritative and exhaustive history of its liberation war. Rather one can see that this particular event and many aspects of this war have been studied by scholars from different dimensions. The incapability to investigate the earlier years leading to this event is over and not only from economic and political point of view but from psychological stand point the birth of this nation has been studied extensively by the scholars. The fact remains that the war of 1971 appears in history as the logical outcome of the previous two decades, and not as merely an accidental event of South Asian history. Bangladesh is now an independent and sovereign state- though birth of this new nation is glorious and painful. Because millions of lives were lost and many became destitutes and *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) was horribly reduced to a land of debris and devastations. But out of this pathetic scene a new nation came into existence and its inception definitely made a mark in the South Asian history and politics. Not only India but a few colossal states of the world as well as neighbouring countries were concerned about the future of that region and ultimately East-Pakistan was transformed into Bangladesh!

Involvement of India as a matter of sympathy for the democratic rights of the People of East Pakistan:

On the night of March 25th, 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman was arrested and sent to Pakistan. From this date till 16th December, 1971, the date of final surrender of Lt. General A.A.K. Niazi, head of the Eastern Command, we do experience many fascinating episodes which no doubt opens a new chapter in the history of South Asia. The circumstances that led to the involvement of India in this war of liberation and how the then prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi overcame the crisis with a birth of a new nation are not only attractive but also give a lesson how India responded for the cause of democratic rights and feeling of the people of Bangladesh. Some scholars have however deliberately criticized India for its active involvement on this war and they have critiqued with reference to the chain of events right from 1965 Indo-Pakistan war as well as the

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hijacking of an Indian Airlines Fokker Friendship Aircraft by two Kashmiri Muslims and the order to be landed at Lahore.¹ India's openly stated sympathy for Sheikh Mujib might have provided Yahiya Khan the President of Pakistan with the excuse he needed for accusation of the expected secession is a matter to be investigated. Mrs. Gandhi repeatedly argued that India had no 'territorial ambition' and the support of six point program of Sheikh Mujib as a matter of sympathizing with the democratic rights of the people. Still India and its Government were accused and Smt. Indira Gandhi and Indian Government headed by her had to step in and play a vital role not only to solve the crisis of the people of Bangladesh but also to ensure a peaceful region in south Asia.

Problems of India and the hard realities of involvement:

It is a known fact that after the arrest of Sheikh Mujib the people of Bangladesh were in a fix and when there was no sign of compromise by the Pak army except crashing the Bengalese, the leaders who took shelter in India were compelled to declare East Pakistan as an independent state named Bangladesh. The Government was formed on April 10, 1971 by the elected representatives of the seventy five million people. At a later stage representatives of the Government were sent out to different countries to explain the cause of Bangladesh and gain support of the world communities. Thus the reality of Bangladesh was communicated to many countries of the world but the matter was not so easy to overcome and Smt. Indira Gandhi as prime minister of India had to face four problems as under:

- a; She had to look after 10 million refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan;
- b; She had to take care about the newly formed Bangladesh Government;
- c; She had to tackle the domestic problem vis-à-vis problems of her own Government and the decisive forces which in many ways challenged her leadership;
- d; She had to mobilize the world opinion at this juncture.

The night of 25th March, 1971 and the massacre of the Bengalis:

The people of East Pakistan voted Awami League to form the Government but the leader of the Awami League Sheikh Mujib was not given chance to form the Government. All the more, as it is known on 25th March, 1971 President Yahiya Khan announced Martial Law and in course of time the night of March 25th came as a night full of 'horror and terror' leading to a full scale massacre and genocide of the Bengalis of East Pakistan. Operations of the *Mukti Bahini* started, the *Razakars*, the *Al-badr* and the *Al-shams* played heinous role as reactionary forces and when the west Pakistani forces were told that the Bengali Muslims had joined hands with the Hindus and the gravity of circumstances was as such that only a *Jihad* could save the 'Islamic state of Pakistan'. So there was a war situation which affected the politics of the sub continent and India being the immediate neighbour and highly sympathetic to the righteous cause provided the Bengalis with some ray of hope. At this stage the intelligentsia, workers, peasants and people of various social strata including political leaders and also the press of India came forward favouring the people of Bangladesh.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi's vision for a peaceful zone in South Asia and the logic of war against Pakistan:

Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India appealed to the people to take into account that her Government would continue to look after the refugees in spite of all hindrances and recognize Bangladesh as an independent state at any opportune moment. As luck would have it, Smt. Gandhi had to face huge problems at this hour but due to her profound leadership skills and strategies she could overcome the situation at this most unfavorable and trying circumstances. In this respect her strategy and states'woman'ship may be considered as a politician with practical sense and her vision for a peaceful zone in south Asia is still a lesson and example for inter-state relationship. It may be noted that finding no sign of hope against the *Mukti Bahaini*, the Pakistani air force made a sudden attack on Indian airfields at Amritsar, Sri Nagar, Pathankot, Abantipur, Jodhpur, Ambala and Agra on December 3, 1971. Being attacked, India declared war against Pakistan. In a mid-night broad cast Mrs. Indira Gandhi made an appeal to the nation 'at 5.30 today (3, 12, 1971) Pakistan launched a full scale war against us, we have no option but to put our country on a war footing'.²

States 'Woman'ship-(i):

This crisis moment may be taken as a testing ground of the states'woman'ship of Smt. Indira Gandhi as well as to appear as a leading politician of the south Asian Nations. Firstly she wanted to convince the nation that the declaration of war by Pakistan was unprovoked and would be timely repelled. She also made it clear that the war in Bangladesh had virtually become a war on India! She even commented 'peace' cannot last if we cannot guard our freedom, our democracy and our way of life. So today we fight not merely for territorial integrity but for the basic ideas which have given strength to this country and which alone we can progress to a better future'.³ After accepting the challenge of Pakistan, India employed her forces to liberate Bangladesh. In the meanwhile she had also appealed to U-Thant, Secretary General of the UNO. At the same time she took every caution to handle some domestic problems within India. For example, she reorganized her own party named as 'Indira Congress' in order to face the challenges from the opposition parties including the Communist Parties of India.

States 'Woman'ship-(ii):

The next step of Smt. Gandhi was to mobilize the world opinion in favor of her stand on Bangladesh. In this respect, first of all she wrote a letter to Edward Heath, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain (6th December, 1971). Incidentally this date was a date worth remembering since Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared (in the Indian Parliament) India's decision to grant recognition to Bangladesh and at this moment Bangladesh was declared as the *Gana Prajatantri Bangladesh*. In her letter she wrote Edward Heath that India was always particular about highlighting the pathetic incidents of East Bengal and how India had to take responsibility of 10 million refugees from that country. She especially invoked the attention of British Government that despite continuous provocation India had maintained normal situation. Smt. Indira Gandhi also appealed to

the British Government to stop military adventurism leading to genocide of the innocent people of Bangladesh.⁴

In the War of Liberation India and Russia always were supportive of Bangladesh. Smt. Indira Gandhi thought that she had two alternatives to look forward and these were....

- a) To conclude a Defence Pact with some states sympathized with India and the proposed nation named Bangladesh;
- b) To place and plead the case in the UNO during the general assembly session of September 1971.

States 'Woman'ship-(iii):

However, on August 9, 1971 India entered into a friendly alliance with Soviet Russia. Mr. Swaran Singh, the foreign minister of India and Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet Foreign Minister, signed a treaty known as the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace in terms of friendship and co-operation.

The case of Bangladesh was placed in the meeting of the General Assembly of the UNO held on 29th September, 1971. Mr. Gromyko drew the attention of the world leaders as to the fact that the Liberation War of Bangladesh was not an internal problem of Pakistan and there was a need of relaxation of tension in the region as a whole. This was, according to him, a matter to be solved by discussions.⁵ Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, leader of the Bangladesh delegation, categorically pointed out that the people of Bangladesh would not stop war unless

- i) they got an independent state;
- ii) the unconditional release of Sheikh Mujib, and
- iii) a complete withdrawal of the Pakistani forces from East Pakistan.⁶ The consequences of such gatherings and discussions in the UN General Assembly were no doubt a diplomatic victory of the people of proposed Bangladesh but these two events i.e. Anglo-Russian Peace Treaty (August, 1971) and the stand and views placed before the General Assembly of the UNO changed the tide of international politics centering the issue of Bangladesh. Smt. Indira Gandhi was not spared from this critical politics because the political atmosphere of South Asian politics turned hot in view of the joint involvement of China and USA in the prevailing politics on the question of Bangladesh. The Indo-Soviet Communiqué made it clear that Soviet Russia had extended her support for India and this was further complicated in September when at a launch given in Moscow in honour of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's visit, Mr. Kosygin said- 'The actions of Pakistan in compelling over eight million people to leave their country, land, property and to seek shelter in neighboring India are impossible to justify.'⁷

Reaction of the 'Big Powers' with special reference to the United States of America:

The above situation was viewed by the United States and in spite of its support after 25th March, USA took a different line of action and the approach Mr. Nixon was something to challenge the Soviet political hegemony in the sub continent. In these circumstances there was also a change in the American attitude toward China as well as Dr. Henry Kissinger's brief visit to Pakistan in July, 1971. A few days later president Nixon announced his desire to visit Peaking and the situation can be realized when Yahiya Khan could call it the 'event of the century'.⁸ It is not difficult to understand the background of such a political development and the cause in the shift in American policy towards China. The facts indicate that American president Nixon's policy as to the events in the sub continent was clearly guided by his intention to challenge any Russian dictation in this region.

Diplomatic strategies of the United States:

It is likely that the president of the USA had an impression that he would be able to influence Yahiya Khan to ensure Sheikh Mujib would not have any trouble and some acceptable solution could be ensured between East and West Pakistan. Again it seems that with logic, he would be able to pursue Mrs. Indira Gandhi to moderate her policy on the question of Indo-Soviet Relation for the cause of Bangladesh. But Mrs. Gandhi was not to be persuaded. This made Nixon critique of India and admirer of Yahiya Khan's efforts to solve political problems of Pakistan. This made the American Government adamant and on 6th December, the American ambassador in the United Nations Mr. George Bush expressed through a broadcast in the television how India was guilty for a clear-cut aggression. Before this on 3rd December 1971 all outstanding licenses for military sales to India were revoked. On the 6th December again every kind of United States' economic aid to India was suspended while at the same time it was made clear that the remaining aid facilities for Pakistan had not been discontinued. Another development was that on 6th December President Nixon himself publicly announced sympathy for Yahiya Khan and the intention was to reduce tension in the sub-continent.⁹

Genocide of Yahiya Khan had a political purpose:

It is a fact that Yahiya Khan's promise to hand over power to the elected representatives of the people of East Pakistan after banning the Awami League was a mockery of the freely recorded voice of 75 million Bengalese. It has been perceived as 'acts of racial hatred and sadism devoid of even the elements of humanity'. According to some¹⁰, "in its sheer diabolical thoroughness this policy evokes memory of Hitler's incredible plans for the rearing a 'Master Race' and disposing of the Jewish population in his Nazi Empire". General Yahiya Khan's genocide was thus without any political purpose and it served only as the last act in the tragic history of Pakistan he had chosen to write with the blood of the people of Bangladesh and "India learnt this lesson quite some while ago- the compulsion of the democratic process brought home that wisdom to Indians".¹¹ As to the moral obligation Indira Gandhi herself had admitted in several interviews¹² and even her principal secretary P.C Alexander admits in his (P.C. Alexander) Memoir titled *My Years with Indira Gandhi* that the decision to go to war

with Pakistan in 1971 'was forced on her by the stupidity of General Yahya Khan in ordering the strike on Indian air-fields without any provocation.¹³ Mr. Alexander also wonders how in the face of vehement opposition of her entire cabinet and the chiefs of the armed forces she declared cease fire "when India could, if it wanted, wrest large chunks of territory on the western front immediately after Pakistanis humiliating surrender at Dacca".¹⁴ The private secretary, P.C Alexander has admired Indira Gandhi's extraordinary leadership in this decision and how her practical sense prevailed over the indomitable wishes of her political colleagues and military officers who were in favour of territorial gains in this critical situation of Pakistan.

The case of Bangladesh placed in the United Nations Organization-arguments and counter arguments on the question of Bangladesh:

Indira Gandhi at that point of time was anxious about the consequences due to the involvement of India in the liberation war of Bangladesh. Between 4th and 10th December the East Pakistan question is said to have dominated the deliberations in the United Nations-Arguments and counter arguments were going on. The Pakistani representatives argued that their country was being forcibly dismembered by the intervention of a fellow member of the United Nations. Pakistan, they argued, was very much willing to explore political solutions in the East, but the basic principle must be autonomy within Pakistan not sovereignty with the alleged help of India. On the other hand the representatives of India declared Bangladesh was then a nation with its own Government but Yahya Khan's refusal to release Sheikh Mujib was conclusive evidence of the unreality of his proposed political solution. The Russians supported the Indian case on the ground that Pakistan had failed to take any satisfactory course which they defined in the form of release of Sheikh Mujib and immediate resumption of talks for the formation of a Government in East Pakistan. On this basis the Soviet Union proceeded to veto all resolutions put forward against the solution of Pakistan crisis.

Involvement of Great Powers and India's attitude to honour the patriotic zeal of the people of East Pakistan:

Our study so far shows that the great powers were inexorably drawn into the mounting crisis of East Pakistan by the logic of the mutual relations and by the unending strategy pursued by Pakistan in response to India's pressure and involvement despite Pakistan's expectation of an intervention by the United Nations. Throughout the fourteen days war the Indo-Soviet diplomatic relationship stood for a cease fire and maintenance for peace in the long run. But the United Nations' attempt failed and the great powers got involved directly in the crisis. The United States dispatched the Enterprise Taskforce into the Bay of Bengal. China also complained for the violation of border rules of India on the North East frontier. The Soviet Union kept Mr. Kusnetsov's mission in Delhi throughout the second week of the war. Thus the narratives of the Indo-Pakistan relations and the interest of the superpowers to decide the future of the people of Bangladesh show how the great powers were drawn into the conflict between India and Pakistan and how their various policies affected the evolution of the conflict. The relationship between India and the Soviet Union and the subsequent almost silent role of the United Nations added a new chapter to the history of south Asia and its politics. The response of Smt. Indira Gandhi

and the role of India to the events of East Pakistan after 25th March, 1971 was nothing but to use diplomatic means to put pressure on Pakistan and to maintain peace in the region. What is true about India as a whole is that Indian Government wanted to give honour to the demands of the patriotic people of Bengal. Yahiya Khan's folly was not only disrupting Pakistan but was also straining almost equally India's economy by pushing across the border a large of chunk of East Bengal's population as his murder gangs could. It is said New Delhi was spending at the rate of rupees forty crores per month. According to our source, foreign aid in this respect was slow in coming. It was apparent at that point of time that apart from making sympathetic noises about the human problem and sending some aid to the refugees, that international body had washed it hands off the Bangladesh problem. The refugee problem and all other related hazards were of solely India's shortcomings.

Cautious steps of the Indian Govt. on the question of Bangladesh:

The first Indian reaction had, however, come on 26th March, 1971 when Indian Foreign Minister, Swaran Singh expressed his government's concern.¹⁵ At this juncture Mrs. Gandhi responded 'one wrong step or wrong word may have affect entirely different to the one which we all intend'.¹⁶ The resolution adopted by both houses of Indian parliament on 31st March, 1971 was not a call to action but Indian position has always been misinterpreted. It is said that Indo-Pakistan War on 3rd December 1971 broke out at a time when Nixon was trying to bring out a political settlement between Yahiya Khan's regime and the Bangladesh Government in exile in India. It is even said that the US efforts for a political settlement were discussed with Mrs. Gandhi when she visited Washington just 10 days before the war began.¹⁷ India has even been condemned being able to enjoy full backing of a super power namely Soviet Russia and Pakistan was supposed to be unfortunate having no effective military support but only diplomatic support of Washington and Peking. Hence some critics intend to conclude that 'politically and psychologically the victory was of greater significance, India at last was able to dismember her principal enemy and inflict a major diplomatic defeat on her number two adversary, China'.¹⁸

Involvement of the Islamic countries and steps to resist India:

Under these circumstances India was in a critical position as neighbouring country with certain persistent responsibilities to maintain peace and tension-free zone. All the more, the most pressing concern of India and especially of Smt. Gandhi was the public support that Pakistan got from Indonesia, Iran Turkey and Malaysia.¹⁹ It is also said that in the course of the year i.e. a variety of trade and financial support agreements were discussed between Pakistan and some of the richer Arab States, notably Saudi Arabia.²⁰ The criticism alleged sympathy of India for Sheikh Mujib is said to have provided Yahiya Khan with the rallying crying he needed for although India made it clear about her intention i.e. no territorial ambition. But a question arises why the people of Pakistan who once supported Sheikh Mujib and his Six Points Program later on raised the cry resist India. This type of factor have, however, been studied in detail by a Major General D.K. Palit in his book titled *The Lighting Campaign; Indo-Pakistan War 1971* (Thomson Press, New Delhi 1972).

India's sacrifice, co-operation and magnanimity of Mrs. Indira Gandhi:

There may be criticism in view of the involvement of India in the liberation war of Bangladesh. But from a rational point of view as the situation suggests, it is likely that India had no other alternative rather than to respond to the appeal of the people of Bangladesh. The unwanted confusion or misunderstanding may easily be sorted out if anybody looks into the details of the Memoir of Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, the first president of Bangladesh. It is said that Mr. Chowdhury once happened to meet Mrs. Indira Gandhi at Claridges Hotel, London sometime in October, 1971. Abu Sayeed Chowdhury is said to have placed two points before Mrs. Gandhi by way of conversations- a) 'Friendship' and b) 'Reward' for the help and cooperation that India and her Government offered to the people of Bangladesh. For all these, Mrs. Gandhi's reactions were – "Justice Chowdhury, it is kind of you to have mentioned friendship. I think even that should be to the people of Bangladesh to decide when they are free..... you have spoken about reward: the only reward I would expect from a free Bangladesh is democracy, I do not like military rule in the neighbouring country"²¹. There cannot be any best recognition of Smt. Gandhi when in the occasion of her assassination in October 1984; Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury paid tribute by recording "she had long ceased to be only an Indian. She spoke for the Third World. She was the guiding inspiration on the movement of Non-alignment .She stood for human solidarity."²² This has been fairly echoed in the memories of P.C. Alexander, principal secretary of Smt Indira Gandhi, who once wrote, "if Indira Gandhi had not taken the crucial decision to accord full scale recognition to Bangladesh, the history of the subcontinent could have taken a different course. International pressure would have become irresistible to find some sort of a face-saving formula.....if time was allowed for an examination of the pros and cons of an independent Bangladesh and a Bangladesh as an autonomous unit of the Pakistani confederation, the decision would in all probability have been in favour of the latter."²³ How such a situation Smt. Gandhi realistically handled and the very issue has nicely been recalled by Alexander. He again informs "It was here that Indira Gandhi showed exceptional courage and foresight. India's promptness in recognizing Bangladesh took the issue out of the hands of constitutional pundits and international pressure groups. After India's announcement of its decision to recognize Bangladesh, it was only a question of a few days for the new nation to gain worldwide recognition. Indira Gandhi's decision in announcing a unilateral ceasefire and prompt recognition of Bangladesh as an independent nation demonstrated the cool courage of a great statesman and not the brashness of an 'Iron Lady'"²⁴.

The qualities of Smt. Gandhi as a states 'woman':

The qualities of Smt. Gandhi as a states 'woman' no doubt brightened India's tradition and commitment to the broader cause of welfare of the entire human society. She seems to have chosen a life up to the demand of the great heritage that India ever stood for in any circumstances and all in all as Prime Minister she faced many of the toughest challenges of her times and the crisis of Bangladesh was one of them. The manner she tackled justifies her human sensitiveness which virtually turned her into a modern legend among her contemporaries and after. The solution of the Bangladesh problem hints at an ideal of a political leader with practical sense and vision in which she

could prove her worth as a great politician and in the long run it marked a turning point in the history of South Asia.

The Emergence of a New Nation and Indira Gandhi's Commitment For The Cause of Human Rights:

The present paper is not just a write up to record achievement of Smt Indira Gandhi for her services to the cause of Bangladesh but a study how a new nation was born and Smt Gandhi responded to the cause of human rights to the people of Bangladesh. She has duly been recognized and honoured by the Government of Bangladesh on the occasion of completion of the 40 the year of the liberation war of the country on 25th July 2011.²⁵ This honoured has been delayed but not denied . It may be noted that even if Mrs. Indira Gandhi did not want any reward in kind, she has been heartily recalled by the Government and the people of the country. There is a living memory of one Nilima Lambah, wife of Satindar Kumar Lambah, a Foreign Service officer who was posted in Ducca sometime in 1972. In fact what Mrs. Lambah has memorized is not only interesting but indicates the respect and gratitude showed to her due to the services for the people of Bangladesh. This memoir is no doubt a lively document on the occasion of Smt. Gandhi's visit to Ducca on 17th March 1972. How was the glamour of the welcome ceremony let us see what Nilima records, "Bangladesh and Sheikh Mujib warmly welcomed Indira Gandhi. She was given a tumultuous.....it was an account of Mrs. Gandhi's visit that a holiday had been announced. This was also first occasion that Begum Mujib went to the airport. She had not even gone to receive her husband on his return to Ducca after his release from jail in Pakistan. A little known fact is that the president of Bangladesh, Justice Abu Syed Chowdhury vacated his apartment in the presidential house, Banga Bhavan, for Mrs. Gandhi."²⁶

Indira Gandhi's Visit to Dacca, the Capital of Bangladesh and the whole hearted recognition of her leadership:

Mrs. Lambah has also described how the visit turned into a remarkable one. People of Bangladesh said to have 'flocked a thousand glimpse of Mrs. Gandhi, and it was said that Dacca was never seen such crowd'.²⁷ Thus this single incident in life of Smt. Indira Gandhi may be considered a face of her life when she was taken much more than a political person and a public figure. She had no doubt a level of ability to come down gracefully from the high peaks of leadership to a platform where one can locate her not only feminine inside but also quality of imagination. In the words Javier Perez de Cuellar, former Secretary General of the United Nations, "when the history of our times comes to be written in the dispassionate future, it will be seen as a high achievement that Mrs. Gandhi, faced as she was by a plethora of national and international problems, struggled successfully to nurture and give substance to that grand vision."²⁸

Conclusion:

The last century was marked as much by extraordinary human achievements in many fields as by senseless destruction of life and property. Indira Gandhi was born and brought up in these circumstances. She, like her illustrious father Jawaharlal Nehru was a

passionate crusader for world peace and disarmament and sought to mobilize world opinion against the nuclear holocaust and other inhuman activities. She might have followed her father's footsteps who used to say "To read history is good, but even more interesting and fascinating is to help in making history....It is the future that fills our minds, the future that we are fashioning, and the present that absorbs all our time and energy."²⁹ It is likely that Smt. Indira Gandhi had sincerely followed this message of her father and her emergence at the critical hour on the eve of the emergence of Bangladesh was just like a crusader for world peace. It provided great relief not only to a world shaken by the horrors and tension but her efforts and passions for peace sought to avoid the temper of war and promote a climate of peace in South Asia. She seems to have been inspired by Gautam Buddha's concern for 'humanity', emperor Asoka's spirit of 'renunciation' and Mahatma Gandhi's idea of 'Non- violence'.

Key words:

Sovereign state, *sonarbangla*, *muktibahini*, *ganaprajatantri bangladesh*, liberationwar, political hegemony, genocide, humanity.

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