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BANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujibur Rahman envisioned Bangladesh’s foreign policy to be predicated on the principle of ‘friendship to all, and malice towards none’. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, the present prime minister, echoes this principle at various international forums. However, when it comes to relations with Pakistan, the foreign policy of Bangladesh does not seem to reflect this principle. Sheikh Hasina continues to harp on the issues of 1971 to block any bilateral interaction. She has found it difficult to ‘forget the past, and to make a fresh start’ — a commitment that Sheikh Mujib himself made at the April 1974 tripartite agreement between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

When Sheikh Mujib stated that the “people of Bangladesh knew how to forgive” it was a clear recognition of the need for the two countries to move on and not remain embroiled in mutual bitterness. Sheikh Mujib visited Pakistan in February 1974 while Bhutto returned the visit in June. The intent of the leadership of both countries at that time was clear. They wanted to normalise the relationship. Ever since, successive Pakistani leaders had visited Bangladesh and expressed the desire to bury the bitterness of the past.

When President Musharraf visited Dhaka in July 2002, he acknowledged that the “excesses” committed during 1971 were “regrettable”. He also paid homage to the martyrs of Bangladesh by visiting the National Martyrs Memorial. Thought leaders from Pakistan’s civil society, academia and media have also expressed the regret that every Pakistani felt at the turn of events in 1971. Faiz Ahmad Faiz wrote an epic poem after his visit to Bangladesh in 1974, asking how many monsoons were needed to wash away the bloodstains.

Yet, the Awami League does not seem to be prepared to move on, even though a large segment of the Bangladeshi population has goodwill for Pakistan. It appears that the question of ‘apology’ is being used as a political tool to keep the relationship at a standstill. Last September, while addressing the UN General Assembly, Sheikh Hasina alleged that Pakistani forces had killed “three million” Bengalis, and that “200,000 women” were abused. The available research indicates that these figures are grossly exaggerated. Authors, like Sarmila Bose, have raised serious questions about these claims. There is growing evidence that excesses were committed by all sides. If the Pandora’s box of fixing responsibility is opened, both nations will suffer painful memories without resolving the issue.

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What, then, is the real motive of keeping the ‘apology’ issue alive? Some thought leaders feel that Bangladesh’s policy choices are constrained by the ‘tyranny of geography’ as it is surrounded by India on three sides. If the India factor is the real reason for Bangladesh’s continued estrangement with Pakistan, then one has to wait for improvement in Pakistan’s relations with India before Pakistan-Bangladesh relations improve.

At a recently held Bay of Bengal Conversation, in which this writer participated, there was no discussion on the events of 1971. The think tanks in Bangladesh are more focused on how the Bay of Bengal will be impacted by America’s Indo-Pacific strategy, China’s economic outreach, and climate change. Belonging to a country that had initiated Saarc in 1985, Bangladeshis are concerned that South Asia remains the least integrated region. A suggestion was made to rewrite the agenda of Saarc, starting with only one item: climate change, which impacts every country of South Asia.

There is no doubt that Bangladesh has emerged as an inspiring story of economic and social development, aspiring to become an upper middle-income country by 2031. Poverty levels have come down from 43.5 per cent in 1991 to 14.3pc in 2016. Its population of 170 million is growing at the rate of 1pc compared to Pakistan’s 220m growing at 2pc. The country has also done well in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Recently, however, Bangladesh’s economy has been facing severe headwinds due to spikes in energy and commodity prices. The balance-of-payments deficit is widening. Inflation is rising, while foreign exchange reserves have shrunk to $38.9 billion by August 2022. The government has embarked on an austerity programme.

Bangladesh is now gearing up for elections that are to be held by December 2023. There is considerable anxiety whether the next elections would be free and fair. The focus of public discourse is on how Bangladesh was being governed and whether it can sustain its high economic growth rates. Sheikh Hasina’s speech in this year’s UN General Assembly indicates that this time, too, her party might want to use the issue of ‘apology’ to charge up its political base to win votes in the forthcoming elections. Whether this will work this time, only time will tell.

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*Published in Dawn, December 3rd, 2022*