

The trauma of 1971 and after

Part. History By M.H. Askari Dawn 19.12.03

IN the annual ritual of recalling the traumatic happenings of December 16, 1971, it is customary to talk of the factors which contributed to the break-up of Pakistan, as also the excesses committed on the people of erstwhile East Pakistan in the process and the persons responsible for them.

However, much less time seems to be spent on an objective introspection of the event immediately following the break-up and the subsequent developments in Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is almost with unseemly haste that Pakistan appears to have reconciled to the loss of the eastern wing.

It does not appear to be adequately realized that once the army action had been launched in the eastern wing things did not remain the same for Pakistan. The eastern wing was an important balancing factor in the political and cultural life of the country for the 24 years that it remained part of it. The Quaid-i-Azam's secular outlook for Pakistan has in fact survived in Bangladesh after its breakaway, even though in Pakistan it has virtually been abandoned. Even a casual visitor to Dhaka or Chittagong cannot but be impressed by the multi-religious, multi-cultural character of life in Bangladesh.

The religious minorities about whose future the Quaid was much concerned, as was evident from his address in the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, appear to enjoy equal status with the majority in the social setup in Bangladesh. There is nothing to suggest that they have been consigned to any secondary or inferior status.

This is not to suggest that Bangladesh's traditional moorings in Islam have been diluted. On the contrary, the Bangladeshis' deep attachment to Islam is evident at the social and cultural events there. During a recent visit to Dhaka this writer was struck by the fact that almost every public function began with a recitation from the Quran and that whenever one happened to be in the bazaar at prayer time one found that the Muslim women doing shopping there would invariably instantly cover their heads as the azan was heard.

eminent Bengali leaders) are essential: there should be complete regional autonomy (in Pakistan) under a parliamentary federal system of government, and East Pakistan must be made confident that it has a self-sufficient defence system..."

Enayetullah Khan has also expressed the view that with their differences on the Tashkent Agreement, the Combined Opposition Parties (which had leaders from both wings) suddenly lost its sense of direction and has confronted the leaders "with the most disturbing but pertinent question of defining the terms of unity" of the two wings.

What particularly deserves to be brought on record on the occasion of Dec 16 is what had been the general lack of concern of the people of West Pakistan for what the eastern wing was going through in 1971 after March 25.

Since a general impression persists in Pakistan that the affairs of Bangladesh continue to be in some manner or the other controlled by India, it is important to recall that differences between the Bangladeshi leadership and New Delhi came to the surface not too long after Pakistan's break-up. One of the earliest problems to impair the relations between Dhaka and Delhi concerned the demarcation of the maritime boundary between the two countries.

The then Bangladesh foreign minister, Dr Kamal Husain, visited New Delhi for talks with the Indian authorities in March 1975. The comment on the joint statement which was issued after the talks by a former foreign secretary of India J.N. Dixit was: "The joint statement... was bald and brief signifying the distances which were emerging between India and

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While Pakistan has experienced a rapid and perceptible descent into religious and sectarian chauvinism, even militancy, the Bangladeshis do not appear to be caught in the web of extremism. They now enjoy the freedom to include the poetry of Tagore and Qazi Nazrul Islam in the syllabi for schools and colleges but Iqbal has by no means been abandoned. A great deal of research continues to be conducted into the literature and philosophy of Iqbal and scores of institutions continue to promote Urdu and its rich literary heritage.

Life in Pakistan — in Karachi particularly — is now much the poorer with the elimination of Bengali literature, art and music which was once an intrinsic part of the cultural scene here. In Karachi particularly, the localities which were conspicuous by their large concentrations of Bengalis until 1971 no longer seem to be as rich in their diversity of culture as they once did. There used to be regular literary sittings with poets and writers whose creative work was mostly in Bengali and the old timers in Karachi miss the soirees of Bengali music which were once regularly held in the metropolis; they are now but a memory of the past.

It was not only the lighter side of life which was rich on account of the presence of the Bengali writers, artists and musicians. The Bengalis also made an outstanding contribution to the debates and discussions in the houses of parliament. Indeed, the representatives of erstwhile East Pakistan in the national legislature were among the most bold, outspoken and non-conformist element.

It was mostly the Bengali members of the Constituent Assembly who during the process of the drafting of the Constitution opposed (without success, of course) the induction of the Objectives Resolution to which must be traced the extreme form of Islamization that Gen. Zia-ul-Haq was able to enact during his years in office.

The courageous position adopted by the Bengali members in the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan has been recorded in detail by the late Begum Shaista Ikramullah in her memoirs. If the counsel of sanity tendered by two Bengali politicians, Mr Nurul Amin and Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, had been heeded to, the trauma of Dec 16, 1971 may well have been avoided.

The editor-in-chief of weekly *Holiday* of Dhaka, Enayetullah Khan, has recalled the views of the two eminent political leaders, from his editorial of February 6, 1966. He says that the Tashkent Declaration (which was signed by President Ayub Khan) "has acted as a catalytic agent and has brought the question of understanding (between the two wings of Pakistan) to the fore... Two things mentioned in these statements (by the two

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Bangladesh." Dixit also says that most of the joint statements issued at the end of official-level Indo-Bangladesh talks in the period mid-January 1974 and mid-1975 indicated that the talks remained "inconclusive and ended in an impasse."

Dixit has also gone on record to say that when the medium-term India-Bangladesh agreement on sharing of the Ganges waters came to an end by the early 1980s, "the old controversies and rival claims to the waters below the Farraka barrage were revived." The delay in transferring the Teen Bigha enclave corridor to Bangladesh by India because of the issue having become subjudice also proved another bone of contention between Dhaka and New Delhi.

More recently, India has also accused Bangladesh of aiding and abetting the anti-New Delhi insurgency by some Indian eastern regions.

The issue of some 15 million Bangladeshis that India claims are residing illegally in India has added to tensions between the two countries. In his address to the Indian parliament last February the Indian president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said that the "problem has assumed serious proportions." The issue had also led to a standoff between the two countries along a 4000-kilometer long border.

Despite the antecedents of the birth of Bangladesh its relations with Pakistan are by and large free of tensions. Dixit has acknowledged that Indo-Bangladesh relations have been in a state of drift since the assassination of Shaikh Mujibur Rahman and has spoken of "increasing linkages" between Dhaka and Islamabad. However, if Pakistanis believe that Bangladesh would want to return to Pakistan's fold or otherwise have some sort of constitutional linkage with Islamabad they are living in a world of dreams.

Referring to Faiz's well known verse "khon kay dhabbay dhu-langay ketni barsaton kay baad", a Bengali friend once said something to the effect that the poet should have known that rainwater may wash away stains of blood since they are on the surface but the real hurt is much deeper and for that the rainwater can be no healing touch.