

# ENDEAVOUR, LEADERSHIP AND THE STORY OF A NATION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bangladesh

Bangladesh and India both celebrated the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's Independence recently, alongside the birth centenary of 'Banghabandu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. There was a predictable outburst of warm sentiments witnessed in Bangladesh on this occasion, but celebrations in India were on an extremely low key. The creation of Bangladesh — from the ashes of East Pakistan — is presumably India's finest foreign policy triumph till date, and it defies imagination why India has been so reticent in acknowledging this fact.

A plausible reason put forward in certain quarters is that it possibly meant acknowledging the role of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in this seminal event, as she is widely acknowledged to be the real architect of this triumph, notwithstanding claims put forward by many a swashbuckling General and others in uniform. Hopefully this canard is not true, though she is currently being demonised for her so-called sins of commission and omission. It would amount to ignoring historical facts, for without Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, it is difficult to conceive of India pulling off such a triumph.

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This may sound like exaggerated praise, but anyone who had an opportunity to witness Mrs. Indira Gandhi's steely resolve during that period — as for instance when it was communicated to her during a meeting of the War Cabinet, that the U.S. Seventh Fleet (which included the nuclear powered aircraft carrier, *Enterprise*) was steaming up the Bay of Bengal, will hardly dispute this fact. Displaying no signs of diffidence, she made it clear that it made little difference to the cause that they had embarked upon.

Few nations across the world can possibly boast of an achievement of this nature. What is even more noteworthy is that while accomplishing this task, India did not claim any 'spoils of victory'. After Pakistan's defeat in East Pakistan, India voluntarily and unconditionally, handed over power to the elected representatives of the newly established nation. Such magnanimity is seldom seen in the annals of world politics.

Not too many among the current generation would remember that 1971 was a signal year for India. It was in 1971 that India had extended all out support to the Government in Sri Lanka to defeat the group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in that country. And, 1971 was again the year in which India contributed to the establishment of a new nation, Bangladesh, which was carved out of East Pakistan following a pogrom launched by the military rulers in Islamabad, that was unmatched in modern times. Half-a-century later, India would have done well to highlight and remind the world of these two events, to further embellish its democratic credentials.

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While India was busy scripting a new destiny for the people of East Pakistan, millions of refugees from East Pakistan were streaming into India. What was especially striking was that despite such a calamitous situation, and the strain on its resources, the Government of the day acted with extreme circumspection and did not give in to the rising clamour for any kind of premature military intervention in East Pakistan. It was to adhere to this position till Pakistan declared war on India in December 1971.

Meantime, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been arrested and flown to West Pakistan. Tajuddin Ahmad had been secretly sworn in as the Prime Minister of an independent Bangladesh and installed in Mujibnagar, from where the new government-in-exile operated till the liberation of East Pakistan. India well recognised that before India could legitimately intervene in East Pakistan, the new government-in-exile had to acquire legitimacy, both within East Pakistan and also internationally. All this demonstrated political finesse of the highest order. It was not easy with over five million refugees coming into the country, conveying gruesome tales of untold atrocities.

Also read | [‘Bangabandhu’ Mujibur Rahman a hero for all Indians, says Modi](#)

At the diplomatic level, India did not act entirely alone. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s carefully crafted diplomatic dispatches to world leaders had helped create a groundswell of support for the persecuted Bengalis of East Pakistan. The signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty in August 1971 came as a shot-in-the-arm for India, encouraging it to stay the course. Russia’s action was in marked contrast to the stand of western nations such as the United States which displayed hostility to India’s efforts, viewing it as an encouragement to the forces seeking to dismember the state of Pakistan. Within the country, regular meetings and the constant dialogue with Opposition leaders ensured that India acted in a united manner, notwithstanding the public clamour for immediate action.

India sought to intervene in East Pakistan, only after Pakistan attacked India on December 3, 1971. Three days later on December 6, India made the formal announcement of recognising the new state of Bangladesh, almost nine months after the Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh had been proclaimed by Sheik Mujibur Rahman. Still later in March 1972, India and Bangladesh signed [a Treaty of Peace and Friendship](#).

The events spread over several months that culminated in the emergence of a new nation, became possible only because of close coordination among the various limbs of the Government, which acted in concert to achieve the cardinal objective, viz., that the struggle of the people of East Pakistan should not go in vain. The West, however, erroneously believed the humanitarian disaster notwithstanding, that it could not let down its ally Pakistan, which was a member of several western-led military alliances. Quite a few other nations, while sympathetic to the plight of the beleaguered population of East Pakistan, were unwilling to extend support fearing the wrath of the U.S.

Also read | [Explaining 1971](#)

A great deal has been written about the military exploits in connection with the formation of Bangladesh — of the Indian Army, the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force. Very little has, however, been mentioned about the role of the intelligence agencies. Understandably so, since the intelligence agencies do not publicise their exploits and operate behind an iron curtain. Fifty years after Bangladesh gained Independence, it may, however, be time to give a pat on the back of the two principal intelligence agencies at the time — the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW/RAW). A vast network of agents had been created by the IB well before the organisation was bifurcated in 1968 into the IB and the R&AW, and the latter built on these assets. These agents played a critical role behind the scenes, preparing the ground for the eventual collapse of Pakistani Army resistance in East Bengal. At the risk of violating a cardinal rule of intelligence, it might also be the opportune moment to pay a silent tribute to one of the most outstanding secret agents of recent times, whose name and pseudonym will, however, have to remain a secret, but whose exploits were no less than that of the most celebrated spy of World War II, Richard Sorge. The time has also come to acknowledge the role of the Mukti Bahini — the Army of Bangladeshi irregulars — fashioned by the intelligence

agencies which played a key role during the conflict. This seldom happens, but is worth a mention, at least in a newspaper article.

The ultimate accolade for India's role in creating a new nation is that Bangladesh is today a relatively prosperous country, having made steady progress from the category of a Least Developed Country to a developing country. Bangladesh "[will get time up to 2026 to prepare for the transition to the status of a developing country](#)". Few countries across the world expected the new nation to survive, let alone thrive, given that the nascent Bangladesh Government was functioning under an untested leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; the country had been born amidst widespread and unprecedented violence and upheaval, possessed scarce resources, and was riven with internecine differences.

Today, Bangladesh is a shining example of what is possible through human endeavour and a wise leadership. It has not allowed itself to be drawn into the vortex of foreign influences, and maintains an independent foreign policy. Relations with India are excellent today, though there have been periods when relations were not all that cordial. Currently, Bangladesh's annual GDP growth exceeds that of its erstwhile parent, Pakistan. Women empowerment has been a major catalyst in Bangladesh's progress, and this is largely responsible for transforming the country.

India's achievement in enabling the people of East Pakistan to carve out a separate destiny for themselves and achieve full freedom from Islamabad, well mirrors what can be achieved when the political, diplomatic, military, intelligence and civil segments act in a coordinated manner under a firm and far-sighted political leadership. This is the acid test for any future eventuality of this nature.

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