

Extremist Threat from Bangladesh

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East Pakistan must have land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests, mineral resources, coal, petroleum, etc, Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be economically and financially strong.

– Sheikh Mujibur Rehman in his book *Eastern Pakistan:
– Its Population & Economics*

Sheikh Mujibur Rehman wrote the above book long before Bangladesh was liberated and he became the President of that country. Behind the slogan for expansion of the then East Pakistan perhaps was the burgeoning population, not that anti-India radicalism was not being initiated in that country. It is well known that Pervez Musharraf as a young Special Services Group (SSG) officer was training terrorists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in one of the many terrorist training camps.

The Border

India shares a 4,096-km-long border with Bangladesh: 262 km in Assam, 865 km in Tripura, 180 km in Mizoram, 443 km in Meghalaya and 2,217 km in West Bengal. Though India liberated Bangladesh in 1971 and returned 93,000 Prisoners of War (PoWs) to Pakistan, nothing was done to straighten the Indo-Bangladesh border.

ICPs have boosted trade between northeast India and Bangladesh.

The area astride the border is mostly flat, with some hilly terrain bordering Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura and Mizoram, and the border divides the Sundarban mangrove forests and the Ganges delta region. The densely populated border region which is cultivated right up to the border is dotted with many Indian territorial enclaves within Bangladesh, and many Bangladeshi territorial enclaves within India, resulting from pre-colonial treaties that have continued. At places, the border line passes right through villages, even buildings. India is constructing a 3,406-km fence of barbed wire and concrete just below three metres in height to prevent smuggling. The fence should be nearing completion as 2,735 km fencing had been completed by 2012. In September 2011, the two countries verbally agreed on land swaps to resolve the issue, but the issue is yet to be resolved. The Land Border Agreement Bill was tabled in the Parliament in November 2013 but is yet to be passed by the Parliament. The enclaves' population, over 50,000 people, would have a say in the matter, and each person would ultimately be allowed to choose his/her nationality.

Fallout of Border Porosity

To add to the above description of the international border, part of it is land and part riverine. For example, Assam shares a 263-km border with Bangladesh out of which 143.9 km is land and 119.1 km is riverine. The Indo-Bangladesh border being the fifth largest land border in the world, obviously cannot be manned for the entire length always and, hence, is patrolled by India's Border Security Force (BSF) and the Bangladesh Rifles better known as the BDR of Bangladesh. Some international-standard multi-purpose Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) have come up, like the one established at Agartala in 2013 for people, transportation and trade with Bangladesh via the Akhaurah land customs station which deals with around 4,500 people every month travelling between the two countries. The multi-use ICPs have boosted trade and economy between northeast India and Bangladesh. Overall, the border is a haven for the smuggling of livestock, narcotics, food items, medicines and for illegal immigration. The border has witnessed of exchange of fire as well, though the incidences have died down in the recent past. As per one report, livestock smuggling into Bangladesh has been ongoing to the tune of 120 trucks on a monthly basis, which indicates an organised mafia with obvious links with the polity and police. Similar has been the case with illegal immigration. Just a few years ago, it was common knowledge that the mafia had fixed prices for facilitating illegal immigration in the case of adults and minors.

Illegal Immigration

In November 2013, a prominent national TV channel carried out a live sting along the Indo-Bangladesh border, showing a stream of illegal immigrants crossing the border by day through a portion of the damaged fence. Replying to the query of the reporter, the khaki-clad security person on the spot said, "We have orders not to interfere." The clip was taken off the national news channel within five minutes. This is just one example indicating the ground situation. In the year 2000, Indian Police Service (IPS) officers attending the National Defence College (NDC) course confirmed that illegal immigration across the border was being engineered by the polity with the connivance of the security forces, and that a posting to the India-Bangladesh border was considered a prize for the obvious fiscal benefits. Large-scale illegal immigration from Bangladesh into India is an established fact, acknowledged by Delhi. It is difficult to lay a finger on how many people have crossed over, however, following the need to be taken note of: Union Home Minister Indrajit Gupta stated in 1996 that over one crore (*10 million*) illegal migrants had entered India from Bangladesh; in 2001, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) estimated that 15 to 17 million Bangladeshi infiltrators had crossed into India illegally since 1971; in 2004, Minister of State (MoS) Home, Shri Prakash Jaiswal, conceded in the Parliament that, out of 12,053,950 illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators all over India, 5,000,000 were present in Assam alone; in 2005, then Assam Governor Lt. Gen. Ajai Singh, in a report to the MHA claimed that up to 6,000 Bangladeshis enter Assam every day; in 2007, the Government of India (GoI) stated that up to 20 million Bangladeshis were living in India illegally; according to a 2009 estimate, there were 15 million Bangladeshis who had taken up residence in India; in 2010, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) wrote to the GoI that some 40 lakh Rohangiya Muslims had entered India illegally from Bangladesh and Myanmar; in 2011, more than 100,000 Bangladeshis allegedly sneaked into India on the last day of Durga Puja amid crowds performing immersion on the Indo-Bangla banks of the Ichchamati river; in 2012, Mullappally Ramachandran, MoS for Home claimed that some 1.4 million Bangladeshi migrants had entered India in the past decade alone.

From the above, the enormity of the problem is obvious but the more serious issue has been the political patronage accorded to illegal immigration in order to increase vote banks, particularly by the Governments of West Bengal and Assam, to the extent that as per some unconfirmed reports, documents for Indian citizenship were being provided on crossing over to the Indian side by the organised mafia. To this was added the caste politics, a glaring example

of which was the enactment of the infamous Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) (IMDT) Act in Assam in 1983 with the connivance of the central government. It was only in 2005 that the Supreme Court scrapped the IMDT Act, part of its judgment saying, “The influx of Bangladeshi nationals who have illegally migrated into Assam threatens the integrity and security of the northeastern region. Their presence has changed the demographic character of that region and the local people of Assam have been reduced to a status of minority in certain districts.” Factually, not only have these illegal migrants become a major source of conflict and resentment in the northeast, they have spread all over the country, including in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Delhi-NCR (National Capital Region).

Extremist Threat

Pakistan has been hell bent on capturing more and more Indian territory right from 1947. The seeds of radicalism and anti-India *jihad* were as deep in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The China-Pakistan anti-India nexus began in the early 1960s when Zhou-en-Lai advised Pakistani President Ayub Khan to raise a militia (*jihadi* terrorists of today) to fight in India's backyard. MK Dhar, former Joint Director, Intelligence Bureau (IB), revealed in his book *Open Secrets – India's Intelligence Unveiled*, “Way back in 1992-93the process of ‘transplanting armed modules’ in the heartland of India had started taking cognizable shape. Some of these cells were identified in Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Kota /Ajmer region of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. SIMI had already started deputing ‘volunteers’ to Pakistan for training along with the Mujahideen, Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres. They established firm linkages with the Islamic Chhatra Shibir, Al Qaeda affiliated HUII, Al Badr, Al Jihad and other organizations in Bangladesh were trained in facilities located inside Bangladesh and under the very noses of DGFI and BDR.”

It is well known that during the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regime of Khaleda Zia, at least four major anti-India terrorist training camps were being run in Bangladesh that reportedly also had SSG and Al Qaeda instructors. From excerpts of the above book of MK Dhar, it is apparent that the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) nexus with Bangladeshi radical organisations is more than a decade old and would have been built upon by the Indian Mujahideen (IM). The BNP regime had been favouring China and Pakistan while maintaining its anti-India stance and to that end, gave full

support to radicalisation and terrorism. Even before India was working out its 'Cold Start' doctrine against Pakistan, a little known fact is that Bangladesh had worked out and was practising its own 'Cold Start', the basis of which was for Bangladeshi forces to go hell for leather for the Siliguri corridor supported by terrorist organisations on both sides of the border. For Bangladesh to work on such a doctrine and undertake exercises to practice it, is unthinkable unless this was suggested by China – in the same way it advised Pakistan to raise a militia to fight in India's backyard. That China would have done so to further its own territorial ambitions along the Himalayas, including Bhutan, is obvious.

The enormity of the extremist threat from Bangladesh which had been existing since the past few decades, again came to the fore dramatically through the Burdwan blasts on October 02 last year. Investigations revealed that cadres of the terror outfit Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), who had illegally migrated to Bengal a few years ago, were involved in the explosion. When National Investigation Agency (NIA) officers arrived at the scene of the blast, two members of the JMB had blown themselves up, building bombs in a house in close proximity of a police station. For several months, senior operatives of the JMB had been quietly slipping into India to visit seven *madrasas* across three West Bengal border districts to build a robust network for future terrorist attacks. Interrogations conducted revealed the larger cross-border design to also destabilise Bangladesh and short-circuit its bilateral relationship with India. This makes sense because the present Bangladesh government under Sheikh Hasina has clamped down on terrorist organisations. It was also revealed that JMB had been on a recruitment and fund-raising drive for months. It had targeted *madrasas* in Murshidabad, Malda and Nadia districts to recruit a dedicated cadre of at least 150 youths. Nearly 50 Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) had been dispatched to Dhaka and Assam, while a bomb factory had been operational for the past three months. JMB operatives based in Sylhet (Bangladesh) were sending cash through couriers to a doctor in Assam, cash consignments going up to Rs 10 lakh at times. Literature recovered revealed the links of the JMB to several global terror outfits. There were pamphlets mentioning Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri and others addressed to "brothers in Chechnya." A DVD supporting the Al Qaeda and Chechen rebels was also recovered from the Burdwan terror house along with 55 grenades, gelatin sticks, chemicals and five cell phones with 50 SIM cards.

What has been most disturbing about the Burdwan blast episode is the apparent connivance of the West Bengal administration with the JMB, irrespective of whether it was advertent or inadvertent. As per media reports, Bangladesh had provided the names of some 20 radicals, including JMB operatives of the Burdwan module and some others, nearly four years ago to New Delhi but the West Bengal government refused to cooperate. What could be more shameful when Bangladesh had been extending full support to India in taking action against the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and other terrorist organisations? As per a report published in the media, the then Research and Analyses Wing (R&AW) Chief had reportedly told then Home Minister Chidambaram, that he could get more done in Bangladesh than the Home Minister could do in West Bengal. What more proof is required of political patronage to terrorism?

Burdwan blast pointed towards political patronage to terrorism.

The Future

Whatever be the exact number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India, they certainly number a few million. What will never be known is how many have been trained in terrorist camps in Bangladesh during the BNP regime or clandestinely even later, and how many sleeper cells they constitute, with what purpose, plus, their links with terrorist organisations in India and abroad. In the recent past, there have been major recoveries of arms caches in Bangladesh in close proximity of the border. These were apparently meant for terrorist organisations in India. For that matter, it may also never be known who the Purulia drop was meant for, given the nexus of politicians with terrorist organisations: were these weapons, discovered by chance after the drop, meant to destabilise India, Bangladesh or both? The present government in Bangladesh has clamped down on terrorist organisations but the latent capacity still exists. The Awami League government has banned 12 terrorist groups including the JMB, but the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan continues to maintain links with terrorist organisations like the JMB, Jagrata Muslim Janta Bangladesh (JMJB), Al Hadith Andolan Bangladesh (AHAB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami (HUJI) in Bangladesh. HUJI also happens to be the mother organisation of Pakistani national Asim Umar who heads the Al Qaeda South Asia branch. Aside from South Asia, the focus of Al Qaeda, the spectre of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) too is looming over South Asia, with youths from India and neighbouring countries joining that organisation. To add to all this is China, actively aiding and arming

insurgents and terrorists in our northeast. The extremist threat from Bangladesh, therefore, should not be seen in isolation. While it exists and can grow in the event of change of government in that country, it needs to be viewed in the context of a collective threat combined with other terrorist organisations. We need to be ever vigilant, and the intelligence agencies and governments of both countries need to work in close cooperation to counter such threats.

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