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RELIGION AND ETHNICITY IN BANGLADESH POLITICS

In the last two decades of its existence Bangladesh, both as a nation and state, has been stumbling over issues that are not uncommon to similarly situated Third World states. Religion and ethnicity are two such issues that are found to have befuddled the process of nation-building in these countries. At its inception Bangladesh did not look like a state that would have to grope and flounder its way through such issues in the days ahead. A constitutional provision for secularism based on prevailing consensus arising out of tradition and historical experience augured well for a state in which the question of religion would not be socio-politically a divisive one. Demographically, a homogeneous country with only about two percent ethnic minorities, Bangladesh also appeared to be a nation that could chart its course for nation-building smoothly. But an empirical observation and a probing retrospection *vis-a-vis* these two issues at the end of the two decades result in disquieting observations. Things have gone awry over the years and aspiration has been replaced by apprehension for the days ahead. The political leadership in Bangladesh is thus at a crossroad and faces a challenge to pilot this still fledgling state through to the next decade and after.

The aim of the paper is to see how this transition from aspiration to apprehension has occurred and through what process; and also with what implications for the future. Divided into two

broad sections the discussion progresses through the two issues in the context of relevant frameworks for analysis. The concluding section, based on diagnoses extends into prognoses. But not entirely sounding like the Cassandra the prognoses are balanced with positive indications for the future.

I

RELIGION IN BANGLADESH POLITICS

The new state of Bangladesh emerged as a secular polity with a constitutional embargo on religion in politics. The first constitution passed on 4 November 1972, abolished (a) all kinds of communalism, (b) political recognition of religion by the state, (c) exploitation of religion for political purposes; and (d) discrimination on religious grounds.¹ The preamble to the constitution emphasized secularism as one of the fundamental principles of state policy. It is obvious that Islam as an individual belief system was not interfered with, but its political use and/or abuse was debarred. There were understandable reasons for doing so. The reign of terror unleashed in 1971 and the consequent persecution of the Bangalee masses in the name of defending Islam and Islamic bond between the provinces of Pakistan had already made the future of Islam as a basis of state policy uncertain in the new state. The obvious and widespread public hatred against the fanatics who collaborated with the Pakistani military junta and denominational politics were also clear indicators that Islam would have no place in the formulation of state policy. This became obvious when the government banned the political parties which had anti-people and anti-Bangladesh role in 1971.²

But the political scenario has since undergone almost a sea change. Starting from the mid-seventies Islam has made a definite

1. Article 12.

2. The parties banned were --- Council Muslim League, Convention Muslim League, Jamaat-i-Islami and Nazam-i-Islam.

come-back in Bangladesh politics.³ Both the establishment and the denominational political parties/organizations have been engaged in a relentless effort, in their own ways, to transform Bangladesh into an Islam based polity. By the Eighth Amendment to the constitution effected in 1988 Islam has been declared a state religion. On the other hand, political parties/organizations deriving inspiration from Islam have also grown in number over the years alongside the re-emergence of the older ones. It thus appears that between the seventies and the nineties Bangladesh has turned almost one hundred and eighty degrees from a secular to an Islam oriented state.

Islamic resurgence is a common phenomenon to the Muslim World stretching from Morocco to Malaysia. Again, such resurgence is not a new phenomenon and has occurred at times of and in response to socio-political and economic turmoils. In analysing this phenomenon in the context of the Middle East and North Africa Richard Hrair Dekmejian comes up with a set of "specific catalysts" which include i) a crisis of legitimacy of political elites and social systems, ii) ineffective rulership, iii) excessive reliance on coercion for elite control, iv) the disrupting impact of modernization with its pro-Western and apparently anti-Islamic ideologies, values and institutions,⁴ Despite apparent

3. For details see Syed Anwar Husain "Islamic Fundamentalism in Bangladesh : Internal Variables and External Inputs" in Rafiuddin Ahmed (ed.) *Religion, Nationalism and Politics in Bangladesh* (New Delhi : South Asian Publishers, 1990), Syed Anwar Husain "Bangladesh and Islamic Countries (1972-1983)" in S. R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain (eds.), *Bangladesh : Global Politics*, Vol. 3 (New Delhi : South Asian Publishers, 1988); and Syed Anwar Husain "Bangladesh and the Organization of Islamic Conference" in Joseph T. O'Connell (ed.), *Bengal : Vaishnavism, Orientalism, Society and the Arts* (Michigan : Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1985).
4. Richard Hrair Dekmajian, "The Anatomy of Islamic Revival : Legitimacy Crisis, Ethnic Conflict and the Search for Islamic Alternatives", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, no. 1, Winter 1980; also his "The Islamic Revival in the Middle East and North Africa," *Current History*, April 1980.

difference between geographical areas and circumstances therein of Dekmejian's study and that in Bangladesh most of these "specific catalysts" are applicable to Bangladesh in one form or other. While building up on Dekmejian's typology this section of the discussion identifies two sets of specific "internal catalysts". First, those that explain why and how the ruling elite in Bangladesh has increasingly relied on Islam. Second, those that explain the reliance of opposing elements on Islam.

Ruling Elite Catalysts

a) Failure of secular government

The first government of the new state of Bangladesh contained a dichotomy. On the one hand, Bangladesh is the second largest Muslim state with a preponderant Muslim ethnicity. On the other hand, and rather paradoxically for other members of Muslim *Ummah*, it was a secular government. It has been observed in the beginning of the discussion that such a secular orientation was as much a matter of ideological mooring of the ruling elite in 1972 as it was of historical experience.

But secularism in 1972 was not a properly perceived principle for the rulers; and as such was misapplied by them leaving enough room for misinterpretation by the detractors. In fact, secularism as a state principle was adopted at the time of writing the constitution reflecting the dominant public sentiment of the time; and was not the result of any clearly spelt-out forethought dating from the pre-liberation days. Neither the Six-Point nor the Eleven-Point programmes, a synthesis of which was considered to be the Magna Carta of the Bangalees, had anything to say on secularism. Of course, given the then political context, these two programmes, until 25 March 1971, aimed at autonomy within the framework of Pakistan; and secularism and Pakistan were antithetical. But it is historically logical to say that the struggle that ensued with the

Language Movement and culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh was secular in spirit and tenor. Even the proclamation of the Mujibnagar Government on 10 April 1971 did not specifically endorse secularism.⁵ This lack of historical background of secularism and its proper connotation was demonstrated during 1972-1975 by the contradictory and even confusing role of Mujib *vis-a-vis* religion.

At the time of putting the constitution bill through the parliamentary process Mujib explained secularism in the following words :

Secularism does not mean absence of religion. The 75 million people of Bangladesh will have right to religion by law. We have no intention of that kind. . . . Muslims will observe their religion and nobody in this state has the power to prevent that. Hindus will observe their religion and nobody has the power to prevent that. Buddhists and Christians will observe their respective religions and nobody can prevent that. Our only objective is that nobody will be allowed to use religion as a political weapon.⁶

This secularism and a ban on religion based politics, although well-meaning, had several unwelcome results for the new state that had more crucial business to be taken care of in charting a survival strategy under the most trying of circumstances. First, the Islamic right was driven into permanent opposition to the Awami

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5. See *Bangladesh Documents* (New Delhi, September 1971), pp. 281-82. The relevant section relating to state principles read as "Having held mutual consultations, and in order to ensure for the people of Bangladesh equality, human dignity and social justice."
 6. See his speech in the Constituent Assembly, 4 November 1972, *Bangladesh Observer*, 5 November, 1972.

League both as a party and government. There were apparent signs that some rightist parties such as the Jamaat-i-Islami would be forming at least working relations with certain radical leftist organizations who had their own reasons for opposing the Awami League government. The rapidly growing popularity of Maulana Bhasani, who managed to combine traditional respect for Islam with a pro-Chinese socialism, was an indicator of such a trend in politics.

The second result was the identification of the Mujib Government in the public mind with India and the Soviet Union. This identification became a galling reality once it was perceived that Bangladesh foreign policy operated very much under the Indo-Soviet guardianship.⁷ As relations with India took a plummeting course, Islam became an important rallying factor for those opposed to Mujib and his policies.⁸ Some observers are inclined to believe that Bangladesh's rhetorical ebullitions for Islamic solidarity is but a major way of expressing an anti-Indian feeling.

A growing personality cult around Mujib, unprecedented degree of corruption that permeated his family circle and government and untold public sufferings caused by the famine of 1974 with a simultaneous breakdown of law and order forfeited all claims of a secular government to popular support. In public eyes the secular government appeared to be the one that failed to deliver the cherished goods. The Mujibite somersault in early

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7. Such a generalisation is sweeping and not entirely based on facts. For an objective appreciation of Mujib's foreign policy see Syed Anwar Husain, "Foreign Policy of Bangladesh 1972-1975; Dependency Relations ?" *Clio*, Department of History, Jahangirnagar University, Vol. V., 1989.
 8. See M. Rashiduzzaman, "Changing Political Patterns in Bangladesh : Internal Constraints and External Fears", *Asian Survey*", vol. 17, no. 9, September 1977.

1975 manifested in turning Bangladesh from a hapless democracy into an authoritarian rule appeared to be the last nail driven into the coffin of the secular government. It will ever remain a point of controversy if secularism had had a fair trial between 1972 and 1975. Faced with odds of gigantic dimension both at home and abroad Mujib's role as a statesman underwent changes. As the section below discusses, he would no longer be a secular firebrand but an apologetic using religious symbols and sentiments with the political purpose of stemming the tides that had been eroding the edifice of power. By the time his government fell under the most brutal circumstances it fell with a stigma and whimper.

b) Leadership Legitimation

Chaos and political turmoil are endemic features throughout the Muslim countries, including Bangladesh. This can be largely explained by the fact that political elites in these countries have failed to establish legitimate and viable political communities. These are also the countries where the gap between aspiration and achievement has ever remained wide. Consequently, Islam has become politically important precisely because the legitimation attempts of the nationalist elites through other means have so dismally failed. Of all such attempts to forge nationalist synthesis only three have registered some temporary success-Ataturkism, Baathism and Bourguibism. Yet none has been permanent nor could they dispense with coercion. Elsewhere in most of the Muslim countries, military or royal autocracies have been dominant some of which have co-opted Islam as a means of self-legitimation. But whatever the strategy of legitimation, the results have been unsatisfactory in achieving long-term stability and order. The experience of Bangladesh over the years supports such a generalisation.

The process of use of religion for political purposes began ironically under Mujib, and he did it keeping in view both internal

and external and imperatives. Internally, he had two purposes to serve : to shore up a tottering administration with a public support base by appealing to Islamic sentiment; and by doing so earning the confidence of the rightist elements. The second imperative makes sense when viewed against the predicament that the Awami League administration was facing with the strident growth of left forces. Seeking to join hands with rightist elements in a bid to cope with leftist challenge is a role not without precedent in the history of the Awami League. It is on record that during the late 1950s there were signs that the Awami League and the Nizam-i-Islam Party would make a common cause against the more radical National Awami Party with its base among peasants and industrial workers.⁹ Mujib's political use of Islam was demonstrated by the general amnesty in 1973 to collaborators without trial, using of Islamic terms in speeches, dropping of the use of valedictory "Joy Bangla" in speeches, revival of the Islamic Academy (abolished in 1972) and upgrading it to a foundation by a Presidential Ordinance of 28 March 1975; and attending of Islamic gatherings.

The internal Islamisation programme of Mujib had an external perspective as well in that he wanted to win over the Muslim countries from whom he needed moral support, diplomatic recognition; and most of all, oil and petro-dollars at a time when the Western sources of aid had suddenly dried up. Again, a success in such diplomatic overtures would, as Mujib himself was inclined to believe, provide him further legitimaton in the eyes of his rightist detractors at a time of fast eroding personal image. The winning of Pakistani recognition and OIC membership in Ferbruary 1974; and securing of the founder membership of the Islamic Development Bank in 1975 provided enough ground for Mujib for a headstart in this direction.

9. Khalid bin Sayeed, *The Political System of Pakistan* (Karachi : Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 88.

Thus Bangladesh polity during 1972-75 was a peculiar dichotomy. It was secular as the constitutional provision making Bangladesh such a state remained untampered. It was at the same time turning towards a pseudo-religious identity under the stewardship of Mujib himself.¹⁰

The end to the Mujib government in 1975 was not effected through a properly elected government but by a military *coup d'état*. Since then and up to 1990 Bangladesh has passed through fitful political changes; and regimes installed in power did not have legitimacy, although the quantum varied at different times.

The Mushtaq regime that was installed after the *coup* was a usurper and thoroughly illegitimate. Consequently, Islam became a handy tool for such a regime to earn legitimacy. The initial proclamation of Mushtaq was couched in such phrases as "mercy of Almighty Allah" and "blessing of the people".¹¹ Moreover, as the chief the Islamic Democratic League, (to all intents and purposes a denominational political platform) he also let it be known that his goals would include Islamisation of the constitution and education system.¹² He, however, did not have time in power to translate his pious wishes into reality.

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10. Such a confusing political scenario has been erroneously dubbed something like a "multi-theocracy" by some researchers. See for example Talukder Maniruzzaman, "Bangladesh Politics : Secular and Islamic Trends" in Rafiuddin Ahmed (ed.) *Islam in Bangladesh* (Dhaka : Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, 1983), pp. 186-192. If theocracy presupposes preponderance of religious principles in the governance of state or of divinely ordained administrators Bangladesh during these years could hardly be called a theocracy, multi or uni. Religion was more a rhetoric than practice.
 11. Cited in Ahmed Shafiqul Haque and Muhammad Yeahia Akhtar, "The Ubiquity of Islam : Religion and Society in Bangladesh", *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, 1987, p. 205.
 12. See Manifesto, Bangladesh Islamic Democratic League, n.d.p. 3; and *Draft Manifesto*, Democratic League, 1976, pp. 5-6.

The process of using Islam for leadership legitimation purposes was given coherent speed and dynamism by the Zia and Ershad regimes. The policy of Ziaur Rahman *vis-a-vis* Islam was, however, one of cautious ambivalence. During his administration the constitution was given a definite Islamic orientation with insertion of "Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim" (in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful). The principle of secularism was replaced by the words. "Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions."¹³ Despite all his apparent leanings towards Islamic orientation and demonstrative attempts at Islamisation Zia never seemed to have contemplated to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic polity. But to him goes the responsibility for rehabilitating the anti-liberation religious elements and thereby introducing a strong divisive force in Bangladesh polity.

Between 1982 and 1990 Ershad, the worst usurper of power who installed himself by toppling a properly elected government, made systematic efforts to continue the policy of rehabilitating anti-liberation forces and of parallel Islamisation culminating in the 8th Amendment to the constitution declaring Islam as a state religion. Comparatively, Ershad, more than Ziaur Rahman, made noisy public demonstration of his pseudo-Islamic orientation which included frequent trips to the Peer of Atroshi, frequent performance of *haj/umrah*, frequent attendance at the *juma* congregation throughout the country; and most of all, wearing of Islamic outfits. The explanation for this difference between them in terms of using Islam is linked to the difference in the levels of legitimacy of their respective regimes. Although a beneficiary of a military *coup*, Zia was, after all, a freedom-fighter and known for ruthless personal integrity and honesty. Thus, at least, in public estimation personal charisma of Zia reduced the level of whatever

13. Article 8 (1A); Article 12 declaring secularism was omitted. *The Proclamation (Amendment) Order, No. 1, 1977.*

illegitimacy of power he could be accused of. Ershad, on the contrary, did not have such a linkage with liberation war and lacked the charisma that Zia had because of questionable personal integrity and image. That the 8th Amendment was moved immediately after the strongest challenge to his regime by the mass upsurge of 1987-88 significant while considering the use of Islam for the purposes of leadership legitimation.

A comparative analysis of the regimes that ruled Bangladesh between 1972 and 1990 thus clearly shows a linkage between the level legitimacy and that of the political use of Islam.

The Parliamentary election of February 1991 provides a classic example of linkage between leadership legitimation and the use of religion. This was perhaps a unique election in that all contesting parties----- denominational/non-denominational and rightist/leftist---- used either religious symbols, sentiment or appeals to win over voters. Even a Hindu candidate by the name Dhiren Bagchi stood as a candidate of the Zaker Party of the Peer of Atroshi; and he was pseudonymed Maulana Dhiren Bagchi. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party almost made a parody of Qalimah Taiyebah by using an election slogan that read, "La Ilaha Illah, Dhaner Shishe Bismillah" (Read the Qalimah and vote in favour of paddy leaf in the name of Allah). The Awami league, supposedly a secular party, in its election manifesto tried to assure the religious parties that the policy of 1972 would not be repeated. Even the prophet was brought into the business of electioneering by the Freedom Party when they raised the slogan "Vote Dile Kurale Khushi Hobe Rasule" (prophet will be pleased if you vote for axe). But the worst use/abuse of religion was made by the Jamaat-i-Islami. It was reported that they sold tickets for heaven at a cash price to their supporters and would be supporters; and the buyers were under obligation to vote for the Jamaat candidates or they would risk being infidels (*Kafir*). Lacking in clearly spelled-out programmes these parties were ideologically

bankrupt and sought to get across to voters via religion and/or religious appeals.¹⁴ In fact, Islam is an instrument used both by incumbent governments and opposition forces as they respond to the political exigencies and try to obtain legitimation and mass support.

Opposition Elite Catalysts

Uneven Socio-Economic Development

With a high rate of population growth, maldistribution of resources, hunger and natural disasters Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries. Predominantly a rural nation, the average farm size is about 1.6 acres per household. Over 60 percent of rural families are landless in a functional sense. This army of the landless poor grows steadily larger. The agricultural commercial and economic policies pursued by the ruling elites since 1972, instead of creating an egalitarian society, have contributed to increasing social tension arising out of ever expanding rural-urban and rich-poor gap. One socially disruptive consequence of this type of elite misrule has been the increase of social instability, and even class polarization in virtually all Islamic countries. With a few exceptions Islamic countries are faced with massive socio-economic problems that have remained unsolved because of elite incompetence and corruption, high rates of inflation and lack of effective development ideologies/policies. Thus faced with such problems and disenchanted with Western and Marxist models the proponents of Islam project an alternative polity where social justice prevails as prescribed by Islam. Islam is thus projected as a native alternative to imposed Western paradigms of development.

14. For a detailed discussion, see Syed Anwar Husain, "Dharmer Name Nirbachan" (Election in the Name of Religion) *Bichitra*, Eid Number 11 April 1991, For similar political scenario in other Muslim countries see Michael C. Hudson, "Islam and Political Development" in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Islam and Development* (Syracuse, New York : Syracuse University Press, 1980), pp. 1-24.

Considering the proliferation of such political Islam throughout the Islamic countries it may also be said that this alternative is an autonomy assertion of these countries *vis-a-vis* the Western world.

In Bangladesh, ears have grown used to hearing such political slogans as "Anno, Bastra, Basosthan-Islam Debe Samadhan" (Islam will solve problems of food, clothing and shelter) and "Allar Ain O Sat Loker Sashan Chai" (Divine laws and rule of honest leader are wanted). It needs to be stressed that such slogans are intrinsically significant in view of government failure to bring about a qualitative change in the livelihood of the masses over the years. But the earliest example of such a challenging Islam in Bangladesh was provided by the public demonstration in Dhaka in March 1976 organised by Air Vice-Marshal Mohammad Golem Tawab in collusion with the then banned Jamaat-i-Islami. The demonstrators chanted slogans for declaring Bangladesh an Islamic Republic and forming a confederation with Pakistan. Thanks to the sagacity of Ziaur Rahman the demonstration could not make any headway; and its leader was bundled out of the country.

Such persistent economic slippage, endemic poverty and political uncertainty explain the mushroom growth of religious or religion based political parties in Bangladesh, which at present number about 66. Except the Jamaat, the Nezam-i-Islam and the Muslim League all others have grown in the post-1976 period. Despite the fact that most of them are spurious and merely signboard based there has been a steady growth in strength and influence of some of the major ones. Longest experience and a strong support base linked to both internal and external sources have made Jamaat the pre-eminent with a consolidated cadre-based network. In the 1970 election the Jamaat emerged second largest party after the Awami League by securing 10 percent of

votes cast.¹⁵ In 1979, the Islamic bloc alliance under the leadership of the Islamic Democratic League of which Jamaat was a part polled 10.07 percent votes; and in 1986, the Jamaat's percentage of votes was 4.6 with 10 seats. In the 1991 parliamentary election this party emerged fourth in position with 18 seats polling 11.73 percent votes.¹⁶ But it overcame its numerical insignificance by achieving a strong political leverage when it extended support to the single majority winner BNP to form government. Zia provided the Jamaat a foothold when it was supposed to languish in oblivion; Khaleda Zia gave it a long arm. Indeed, as a political party in Bangladesh the Jamaat owes much to this splendid couple. It is also true that the nine-year long anti-autocracy movement provided this party with much of the favourable circumstances for getting parallel, if not into, with the mainstream of politics.

The emergency presidential election in late 1981 following Zia's assassination is an indicator of Islamic trend in Bangladesh politics. Hafiz-zi-Huzur, an obscure octogenarian with orthodox fundamentalist orientation finished third; but he polled only 1.79 percent of votes. Despite the quantitative hollowness this result was a stunning surprise for the Bangladesh watchers.

During the Ershad regime the Peer of Atroshi, again a man of mysterious origin, boasted of at least four crore disciples. Ershad was his *murid* (disciple); and it was also reported that 12 of his ministers, 62 members of parliament and at least 3 generals were also *murids*. The Zaker Party, the party floated by the Peer, fielded 249 candidates in the election of 1991, but all of them lost with their deposits forfeited. This is an indicator of the depth or the

15. Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath*, (Dhaka : Bangladesh Books International, 1980), p. 73.

16. *Ekota*, 8 March 1991.

lack of pure Islamic appeal in politics. It is one thing to subscribe to a belief-system, but it is quite the other to cloak it with a political garb.

The latest to join the congeries of Islamic parties with political ambition is the Islamic Shasantantra Andolon. But political Islam is not the monopoly of only rightist and denominational organizations. As has already been mentioned in the case of 1991 election, there are numerous examples of left personalities/parties hobnobbing with Islam. To cite one example, Major Jalil, a veteran freedom fighter, immediately after liberation appeared on the political scene as a rabble-rouser with an anti-Indian slogan and held magical attraction for the young generation by floating the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), ostensibly based on scientific socialism. But, by 1982, he transformed himself into a leader of a denominational party named Jatiya Mukti Andolon with a professed aim of establishing an Islamic polity in Bangladesh.

Implications

Although a Muslim majority country, Bangladesh has so far enjoyed the reputation of being a country blessed with exemplary religious communal harmony. This harmony has its origin in the syncretistic nature of Islam and also in the socio-cultural scenario drawing inspiration from the Bhakti cult initiated by Sri Chaitanya and the humanistic mysticism of sufi saints.

The steady rise of religion-based politics aided and abetted by the ruling elite may be counterproductive not only in the social and cultural perspectives but in the security perspective as well. The appearance of micro-political institutions with obvious aim of projecting/protecting religious minority interests and of such fissiparous political moves as *Swadhin Vangabhumi* as an exclusive abode of the Hindu community has cross-border

ramifications. History is replete with instances of rise in religious frenzy leading to communal tension.¹⁷

Besides portending serious communal tension political Islam has also effected an alarming socio-political divide between the pro and anti-liberation forces. The violent incidents on the Chittagong University campus since 1986 and the one on the Dhaka University campus involving the Jamaat leader Matiur Rahman Nizami are two of such countless examples of how these two opposing forces are arrogantly and aggressively poised against each other. Unless checked by right type of policies and actions by a perceptive leadership such a trend has all the potential to push Bangladesh to the brink of disaster.

ETHNICITY IN BANGLADESH POLITICS

Occupying about one-tenth of the territory of Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is inhabited by thirteen tribes of different sizes.¹⁸ Usually ethnic tensions occur in such limitrophic areas comprising border regions. But a comparative survey of ethnic crisis spots all over the world shows that such tensions and problems are originally linked to dominant elite misrule.¹⁹ In the case of Bangladesh also the CHT ethnic issue has been created

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17. Recent press reports have it that in the rural areas of southern districts the Hindu minority community are being harassed and even tortured. Statement of CPB leader Saifuddin Manik, *Ibid*, 30 August 1991.
 18. Out of 2 percent total tribal population in Bangladesh two-third is made up of the 13 tribals of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The comparative ratio of these tribals are as follows : 1. Chakma 30.57%, 2. Marma 16.60%, 3. Tripura 7.39%, 4. Murong 2.17%, 5. Tanchangya 2.04%, 6. Bom 0.7%, 7. Pankhu 0.21%, 8. Khumi 0.11%, 9. Mro 0.12% 10. Khyang 0.17%, 11. Chak 0.10%, 12. Lushai 0.08%, 13. Riyang 0.31%. The total number is about 500,000.
 19. For an elaboration see Dov Ronen, "Ethnicity, Politics and Development : An Introduction" in Dennis L. Thompson and Dov Ronen (eds.) *Ethnicity, Politics and Development* (Boulder, Colorado : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1986).

through the cumulative effects of misperceived notions and misdirected policies and actions of successive regimes. What was originally a small and internal problem has over the years become multidimensional and almost intractable. And, in the process a political movement has grown into a full-blown insurgency with cross-border involvements. In a nutshell, CHT is now an internal problem with regional and international implications. The regional dimension is added because of reported Indian involvement and the sanctuary provided for the *Shanti Bahini* insurgents on the Indian soil across the border. The international dimension arises out of the impact that has been created by the intensive propaganda of the insurgents on the international human rights activists; and a concrete example of such international awareness is the visit of a multinational commission in December 1990, which released a comprehensive report in May this year.²⁰ Paradoxically, however, Bangladeshi public has very little or no comprehension of the issue because the closed-shop style of management by the successive regimes.²¹

Origin of the Issue

As it has been posited in the beginning that ethnicity would be considered as a part of the nation-building process we need at this stage a relevant framework for analysis. To a large extent, nation-

20. "Life is Not Ours : Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts", The Report of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, May 1991 (Distributed by IWGIA Fjolstraede, Copenhagen, Denmark and Organising Committee of Chittagong Hill Tracts Campaign, the Netherlands). But the report, despite its voluminousness, is one-sided and limited in scope. The Commission would have done commendable job had it also suggested desirable/practicable solutions besides reporting human rights situation only.

21. Thanks to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) things have somewhat changed since 1988. A few groups of journalists, intellectuals and students have been taken on short trips to some of the selected spots and some reports have since appeared in the dailies and weeklies.

building involves relationship between a central government and regional groups or nationalities. Theroretically, this relationship can be analysed within the framework of the centre-periphery (CP) model. But this model has relevance more to the relationship between the Western capitalist centres and the Third World countries.²² But, as Kothari argues "both the process of internal consolidation and external linkages can be explored with help of ...centre-periphery model."²³

The process of nation-building involves the penetration of central institutions downward from the centre to the periphery. The result of this penetration may be the assimilation and/or incorporation of the periphery in the central institutions. Alternatively, the penetration may generate a cleavage or conflict between the central nation-building culture and the increasing resistance of the ethnically, linguistically or religiously distinct subject populations in the peripheries. Hettne and Friberg suggest that it is in response to these cleavages that the local political elites mobilize the population politically. A mobilization is termed *reactive* when it is undertaken in defence of rights believed to have been unjustly removed or denied. If assimilation does not take place, the outcome is either repression or *proactive* mobilization meaning the demands of new rights which the groups were not previously entitled. In such a situation proactive mobilization will take on a revolutionary character leading either to separation or revolution.²⁴ In analysing the origin of the CHT ethnic problem we find all the elements suggested in this model : cleavages between centre and periphery leading to reactive mobilization, repression and proactive mobilization.

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22. J. Galtung, "A Structural Theory of Imperialism", *Journal of Peace Research*, No. 2, 1971.
 23. Rajni Kothari, "State and Nation building in the Third World" in Rajni Kothari (ed.), *State and Nation Building : A Third World Perspective* (New Delhi : Macmillan, 1976), pp. 11-12.
 24. Bjorn Hettne and M. Friberg "A Tentative Approach to Mobilization Research" Part-I (mimeo) Goteborg, p. 1-12.

A number of steps taken by the centre dating from Pakistan days apparently in consonance with Western model of nation-building led to the process of reactive mobilization at the periphery. These steps simply ignored the vital question of development-culture interface, a question that has engaged the attention of Third World development pundits only recently.²⁵

The first step²⁶ of the centre creating the background for reactive mobilization was the Karnaphuli Multipurpose Project, began in 1957 and completed in 1962. The project was launched to accelerate economic development of the then East Pakistan; but when completed, it subjected the life and economy of the tribals to serious strains. The Kaptai Lake submerged an area of about 400 square miles. The submerged area includes 54000 acres of settled and cultivable land. About 100,000 persons including a sizeable number of *Jhumiyas* were affected. Of the affected families only 12,000 could be settled in about 20,000 acres of inferior lands. Even in 1981, a somewhat better-off displaced person was found

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25. For an elaboration of this argument in the context of Bangladesh see Syed Anwar Husain, "The Existence of Subcultures, Ethnic or Indigeneous, or Marginalized or Disadvantaged Groups and their Relation to National Culture : Historical Perspective", paper presented at the national seminar on The Development-Culture interface : Cultural Perspectives on Economic Progress" organized by the National Association of Social Sciences, Bangladesh, in Dhaka on 7 September 1989.
 26. For the background of the CHT problem see S. N. Islam, "The Karnaphuli Project : Its Impact on the Tribal Population", *Public Administration* (Dhaka), vol. 3, no. 2, Summer, 1978, Syed Anwar Husain, "Insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts : Problem of Ethnic Minorities in Bangladesh", *Asian Studies* (Calcutta), vol. 4, no. 1, 1986; Nurul Amin, "Secessionist Movement in Bangladesh : The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts", *Regional Studies*, vol. vii, no. 1, Winter, 1988-89; Syed Azizul Ahsan and Bhumitra Chakma, "Problems of National Integration in Bangladesh", *Asian Survey*, vol. xxix, no. 10., October 1989; and Shawkat Ara Husain, "Parbatya Chattograme Upajati Samasya O Bangladesh Sarkar", *Asiatic Society Patrika* (vernacular journal), vol. 8, December 1990.

lamenting, "I have not been able to construct a house like the one built by my ancestors and which is now under the waters of the Kaptai Lake." The founding of the communist party by the late sixties as an underground organization was the first sign of reactive mobilization of the tribal people.

A basically economic issue was transformed into an economic political-cultural problem by the government of Bangladesh between 1972 and 1975. The misperceived steps of the centre creating such a problem were quite a few. First, Mujib's call for the tribals to become "Bangalees" (1972-73). Second, passage of a bill in parliament on 23 January 1974 declaring Bangladesh a uni-cultural and uni-lingual nation-state. Third, settlement of the Bangalees in the tribal areas.

The signs of reactive mobilization could be seen in the retorts of tribal elites. "As citizens of Bangladesh we are Bangalees, but as a race we have our own identity. We want to retain this identity". Manabendra Narayan Lama, MP fumed in parliament, "Our main worry is that our culture is threatened with extinction. But we want to live with our separate identity". Even the student community, specially, the Chakmas vowed to uphold their culture against intrusion by the centre.

Insofar as mobilization was concerned the years between 1972 and 1975 witnessed a sudden transition from reactive to proactive phase. Since 1972 the tribals began demanding self-government and the formation of a special legislative body. On 16 May 1972, the Communist Party surfaced but maintained a low key profile. The main task of mobilisation was to be carried out by the political front, *Jana Sanghati Samiti*. On 7 January 1973, a military wing, *Shanti Bahini*, was added. Such a consolidation of organizational set-up was followed by drawing up of a Four-point charter of demands and presenting the same to the Government of Bangladesh. The charter, to all intents and purposes, demanded

autonomy for CHT and withdrawal of non-tribal settlers. From now on the mobilization would remain *proactive*; and it remains so until today.

The Awami League government stopped Bengali settlement in 1973; but rejected the demand for autonomy. This drove the *Jana Sanghati Samiti* to immediate action. In response, the government mounted military offensive. First, three military cantonments were set up in CHT, each at Ruma, Dighinala, Ali Kadam. Second, a joint Indo-Bangladesh operation against CHT insurgents was reported to have been planned, but could not be carried out because of a sudden political change in mid-1975. Since then India also changed its policy *vis-a-vis* the insurgents, who have since been used more as a scalpel against Bangladesh.

Ziaur Rahman addressed the problem economically, politically and demographically side by side with keeping up military operations. By the closing days of the Mujib administration autonomy demand of the tribals was taking on the character of independence movement for a "Jummaland". Zia perceived such a demand as a consequence of economic backwardness and thus instituted in January 1976, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDB) to gear up development works. Politically, to open a channel of dialogue with the insurgents Zia used the services of queen mother Binita Roy and Awang Shue Pru Chowdhury as advisers; but to no avail. The second political move was to institute a tribal convention in 1978 under the leadership of Charu Bikash Chakma. Comprising representatives of middle class tribals the tribal convention was supposed to counter the *Shanti Bahini*. This move also failed to achieve desired results. The perceptive recommendations of an opposition parliamentary committee for a comprehensive political settlement were, however, ignored by the Zia administration. But the most dangerous policy that was followed by this regime was the one that may be termed demographic swamping by a planned

settlement of landless Bangalees between 1979 and 1981. As a result the ratio of Bangalee settlers in CHT rose to 27.05%; whereas in 1947, the ratio was 2.05%. In 1990, this ratio stood at 39.38%. Another political move was to get the "Disturbed Areas Bill" passed in parliament in 1980, which, however, floundered because of strong opposition. If passed the law would have armed the police authorities with powers to arrest or shoot a person on "reasonable suspicion" in not only CHT but other areas where there would be law and order situation. A prospect for political settlement was however, created through the efforts of General Monzoor (G.O.C. 24th Division) by the beginning of 1981. But the prospect could not be translated into reality because of assassination of Zia and Monzoor in May and June 1981. Thus the Zia administration left the problem festering dangerously.

The Ershad regime continued counter-insurgency operations of the past; but at the same time undertook, steps to develop socio-economic infrastructure²⁷ and for political settlement. Resembling the Ramon Magsaysay-Lansdale model of counter-insurgency to deal with the Hukbulahap guerillas in the Philippines in the 1940s and 1950s²⁸ the security forces in CHT have been found to be engaged in measures to win "hearts and minds" of the tribals. The first political move under this regime was the declaration of four general amnesties between April 1983 and September 1989. Taking advantage of these amnesties 2,294 insurgents surrendered. Moreover, between 1987 and 1990, 30, 399 tribals returned from camps across the border. The second important political move was to engage the representatives of the insurgents in dialogues, six sessions of which were held between October

27. For details of socio-economic development in CHT over the decades see Syed Anwar Husain, "Shanti Ashantir Dolachale Parbatya Chattagram" (vernacular), *Bichitra*, cover story, 2 February 1990.

28. For details on this model of counter-insurgency see "An American Strategy for Third World Insurgencies", *The Heritage Foundation Backgroundier*, March 12, 1991, Washington, D.C.

1985 and December 1988. The negotiations stalled in the process as in March 1989, the government passed the Local Councils Act (Act 19,20,21, 1989) for constituting three local government bodies in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari. The Act provided for devolution of 21 subjects to these councils; and thereby for limited autonomy. These councils gave proportional representation to the tribals and non-tribals. These measures have been objected to by the insurgents as they allege that the members although elected were handpicked by the government. Controversies and criticisms aside, these measures have brought about two qualitative changes in the scenario. First, a beginning has been made in the direction of autonomy, albeit a limited one at the moment. Second, the ten most disadvantaged smaller tribes, other than the more advanced Chakma, Marma, and Tripura, have for the first time been initiated to a political process. This innovation, if continues in the right direction in the long run would create a political environment not to be imbalanced by the domination of the most advanced Chakmas. During the Ershad regime 3 out of the 21 subjects were transferred to the local government councils.²⁹ But the present BNP government transferred the rest of the subject in June 1991. In view of lack of manpower and expertise such precipitate transfer of 19 subjects at a time appears hasty.

29. The subjects to be administered by the local councils are mostly what may be called "nation-building" ones including 1. Law and Order, 2. Coordination of Development Works, 3. Education, 4. Health, 5. Public Health Projects, 6. Agriculture and Forestry, 7. Animal husbandry, 8. Fisheries, 9. Cooperatives, 10. Industry and commerce, 11. Social welfare, 12. Culture, 13. Development of Land Communication Facilities, 14. Development and Management of Ferries, 15. Maintenance of Playgrounds and Public Places, 16. Implementation of Government sponsored Development Projects, 17. Development of Overall Transport and Communication Facilities, 18. Water Supply and Sewarage, 19. Construction and Maintenance of Rest-houses and Circuit houses, 20. Planning for local development; and 21. Planning moral and economic development of local populace.

But the aspect of the problem that has remained unaddressed over the years relates to the Bangalee settlers. There are two aspects of the problem. First, the landless poor transplanted from other regions have nowhere to go but are victims of *Shanti Bahini* brutalities. Second, the Bangalees who have emerged as the local elite by exercising control over trade and commerce have added an element of exploitation of smaller tribes, and even of settlers. The anti-Bangalee sentiment has much to do with the role of such Bangalees.

Because of Indian involvement a permanent and realistic solution to the problem needs positive Indian participation in the process. The present democratic government should have better working relationship with democratic India insofar as negotiations concernig this issue are concerned.³⁰

Another remote, but not altogether insignificant aspect of the problem is the 125 kilometre open border of Kasalong. Keeping this strategic inlet ever ready for *Shanti Bahini* intrusion while at the same time continuing counter-insurgency and developmental efforts in this region draining huge amount of scarce national resources do not make sense.

Despite what has been done rightly and wrongly the problem has remained unsolved, and at times appear to be intractable. A serious attempt at diffusing tension in the area and finding a solution to such a national problem presupposes a national consensus. And, this can be arrived at through the spade-work of a national level committee comprising experts, members of parliament with relevant interest and expertise and representatives of tribals and non-tribals from CHT.

30. The changed attitude of India towards Bangladesh was reflected in the editorials published on 30 August 1991 in the *Times of India* and the *Indian Express* calling for quick resolution of all bilateral problems including the tribal issue. *The Daily Star*, 3 September 1991.

CONCLUSIONS

It thus becomes apparent that both religion and ethnicity have been mishandled by the ruling elite over the years. Mishandling of the religious issue has produced elements of socio-political cleavages fraught with a high violence potential. The trend may be reversed only by a correct strategy of socio-economic development which can ensure basic human needs. Instead of harping on religion for legitimacy purpose the ruling elite would do well by concentrating on delivering goods for the poor masses. As a belief system, religion is well-rounded enough to take care of itself when people are properly fed and clothed.

As in the case of religion, ethnicity for a country like Bangladesh should have been a non-issue. But over the years and through mispercieved policies and actions it has grown into a delicate, intriguing and even intractable issue defying easy solution. Only a strong, well-informed, well-advised and perceptive leadership can prevent further deterioration of situation and work out a satisfactory solution. With a properly elected democratic government in power free from legitimacy hangups we can keep our fingers crossed for a future with positive features.