

# Engaging Bangladesh for Lasting Peace in Northeast

---

DB SHEKATKAR

Northeast (NE) India has faced insurgency for almost 60 years. The region's proximity to Bangladesh, Myanmar and China has encouraged insurgents from Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya to use these countries and, at times, Pakistan, for retreat, safe sanctuary and training, as also for procurement of weapons, equipment and safe parking of funds. For any insurgency to succeed, there have always been, and there shall always be, certain basic requirements or factors or a cause to fight for. The causes may be a desire for independence, elimination of foreign exploitation, relief from alleged or actual oppression, desire for economic and social improvement, elimination of corruption, etc. The support of the local population which is one of the most important factors for the success of any insurgency will not be available unless there is a convincing cause. Unfortunately, after India's independence, due to a lack of "perception management capacity and capability" and "image management capability", the people of NE India were indoctrinated to fight for all the above causes.

In any insurgency there are always at least four participants: the government in power, the local population, the insurgents and external powers, specially the immediate neighbouring countries. Apart from these four factors, favourable terrain, secure bases (within the area of insurgency and outside), intelligence, mobility and propaganda are essential. The key factor for the growth of insurgency in NE India has been the support from neighbouring countries – China, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Pakistan. Their support is linked to larger geo-

political rivalries and geo-strategic interests as insurgency in NE India provided, and continues to provide, a favourable environment and fertile territory to weaken and destabilise India. Pakistan's interest in supporting the insurgency also has been based on "payback" for India's attempt to provide humanitarian assistance in East Pakistan, which succeeded when Bangladesh declared independence from Pakistan in 1971. Even after the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation, successive governments except the present (Awami League) government in Bangladesh continued to offer support to the insurgents in NE India as a response to "perceived" and "alleged" attempts to cause trouble in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

## **Deep-Rooted Conspiracy and Hidden Agenda**

If the propagated thought process and philosophy of some important political figures in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Pakistan is studied and analysed carefully, it becomes clear as to why and how NE India became a conflict zone due to foreign involvement. In the mid-1950s, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (who later became the President of Bangladesh) wrote in the book *East Pakistan: Its Population and Economics*, that East Pakistan needed to accommodate land for its expanding population and because Assam had abundant land, forest and mineral resources, East Pakistan must include Assam to be economically and financially strong. It must be remembered that Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh were all part of Assam up to the beginning of the 1960s. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, advocated in his book, *Myth of Independence* that it would be wrong to think that Kashmir comprised the only dispute between Pakistan and India, though, undoubtedly, it was the most significant one; another, at least as nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute, was that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to East Pakistan.

Detailed analysis would also reveal why East Pakistan actively supported insurgency in different parts of NE India, especially in Mizoram and Tripura. Laldenga, who had engineered the insurgency in Mizoram<sup>1</sup> in 1966, continued to enjoy safe sanctuary, protection, training, financial support and supply of weapons, and equipment for over 20 years from East Pakistan. Even after the emergence of Bangladesh, Laldenga continued to get support from Pakistan through pro-Pakistani elements, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh. The situation is gradually changing with the coming to power of the present government of the Awami League, in Bangladesh. Shri Manmohan Singh, after his visit to Bangladesh, had stated, "There is a good percentage of people in

Bangladesh, specially the religious hardliners and fundamentalist who support and sustain Pakistan's grand designs to keep NE India in a state of unrest and violence". This is based on the designs of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Pakistan Army to keep the Indian Army as well as its security forces committed in NE India, at the cost of security at the western and northern borders and the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan.

## **Western Interests and Perceptions of NE India**

A study conducted by a Western think-tank, the Agencia-International De Prensa, released in 1966, advocated the feasibility of carving out of an independent nation in NE India by establishing a "United and Independent Bengal" comprising East Pakistan, West Bengal, Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim<sup>2</sup>. The study was based on the assumption that "the separatists and insurgents are counting on the USA and other Western powers to give them the necessary assistance. They are confident that these powers would be interested in establishing an independent state in Southeast Asia which could provide a shield against Chinese aggression. This could be a plausible reason for China to sustain insurgency in NE India. China has provided assistance to the insurgent movements since 1956. The self-styled Commander-in-Chief of the Naga Army, Mau Argami<sup>3</sup> was arrested in 1969 while returning to India after having received training, weapons, and funds from China." Another example of Western interest in NE India was, "Project Brahmaputra". A special research cell was established at George Washington University with the approval of the US State Department in the late 1960s to conduct research on NE India and Sikkim to "throw light on public opinion in the region to establish in what measure the present status of the state remain acceptable or whether there are indications, that the formation of a new state is a current problem"<sup>4</sup>.

## **The Bangladesh Factor**

The large scale illegal migration from Bangladesh into NE India is not only an economic issue, but also a part of grand design to create a "voting constituency" based on the vote power of illegal migrants to capture political power in Assam, followed by Tripura and Meghalaya in due course of time. There are indications that by 2026, the Chief Minister of Assam will be a person of Bangladeshi origin or a person claiming to be from Assam from a specific community, duly supported by illegal migrants who have acquired voting rights and continue to expand their influence and strength. The illegal migrants have already impacted the

**Pakistan's support to NE insurgency is based on payback for liberation of Bangladesh**

social, political and economic landscape of Bengal. There is a gradual spread of this cancerous growth of “strategic migrants” into Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. The funds for such ambitious designs are collected from sympathisers and supporters based in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala and, of course, the Middle East. Experts have been warning the central government about the dangerous implications of strategic migration and demographic imbalance in NE India and especially in Assam. Extremist organisations like the Bengal Tiger Force (BTF) and Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA) have been formed to protect the interests and security of the illegal migrants. Such organisations can always be used as a vanguard and sleeper cells for Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) when the need arises. Insurgency received a boost and active encouragement during the time of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regime in Bangladesh. Large numbers of camps were set up along the Indian borders to train the cadres of NE-based insurgent groups and extremists of the Indian Mujahideen (IM), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) and Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) by operatives of the Special Service Group (SSG) and Al Qaeda.

The important point to consider is why Bangladesh has become a safe haven for the insurgents from NE India. It needs to be considered that Pakistan did not want India to succeed in Bangladesh. The USA, UK and China did not want India to succeed in Bangladesh. Both Pakistan and China would like to retain Bangladesh as a launch pad against India. NE India provides that opportunity. It was regrettable that India's political leadership, governing and security mechanism was not clear or keen on establishing a permanent influence in Bangladesh. Fortunately, with the change of political and national leadership in India things have started improving since 2014. “Influence” in Bangladesh should not be misunderstood or misinterpreted as dominance over Bangladesh. Both Bangladesh and India have a common history, culture, language, food habits, source of river water, agriculture, means of sustenance and also common threats – from man-made disasters to natural ones. With so many commonalities and similarities between the two nations that are also neighbours, the future and destiny of our coming generations will be the same, and together. It is, therefore, essential that both Bangladesh and India remain engaged to ensure safety, security, progress, prosperity and peaceful coexistence for the good of our people and coming generations.

## **Engaging Bangladesh to Ensure Peace, Stability, Progress and Prosperity**

It is heartening to note that the present government in Bangladesh and even the leadership of the armed forces of Bangladesh have realised the philosophy, importance and need for peaceful coexistence. A number of positive steps are being taken by the government. However, the 'misdeeds' of the previous BNP government and the 'mindset' towards India of the political leadership, hardliners as well as fundamentalists, will take a long time to be erased from the minds of the youth of Bangladesh. In the recent past, there have been major recoveries of arms caches and interception of large quantities of weapons and ammunition at sea ports, which were meant for the insurgents and terrorist organisations operating in the NE and other parts of India. Steps have been initiated to ensure that the transit routes of weapons through Bangladesh are blocked. In the last few years, prominent United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) leaders and operatives have been arrested and action taken to trace and track the bank accounts and transactions being operated by ULFA and their supporters. Periodical meetings and contacts between the border security forces of India and Bangladesh as well as intelligence agencies hopefully should create a functional understanding and effective mechanism to deal with insurgency and terrorism.

Illegal migration continues to be a sensitive issue between the two countries. Employment opportunities and means of sustenance attract the immigrants into the NE and other parts of India. It is in India's interest to support Bangladesh in improving its economy by investments and technical assistance in the fields of agriculture, industry, commerce, trade and shipping. Infrastructure development, and rail and road connectivity will generate employment opportunities for Bangladeshi nationals. It will also open new avenues of transportation through Bangladesh to the NE, Bhutan and Nepal, which, besides savings in the cost of fuel, will mean less transit losses and time. Chinese investments in infrastructure projects in Pakistan and Myanmar can be taken as a model, wherein infrastructure development will ultimately benefit transportation of goods to China. On similar lines, India's investment in Bangladesh will provide transit facilities to the NE states as well as connectivity to Myanmar and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). There is an age old philosophical truism that interdependence of interest, be it economic or security, can reduce chances of conflict between nations, specially neighbours. Stability, peace, progress and security in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar are interlinked and interdependent due to our common interests.

Without harbouring a big-brother attitude, India's governing mechanism should assist Bangladesh to ensure stability, security, development and prosperity. India's recent initiative in solving the long standing, emotional issue of enclaves is an excellent political and diplomatic gesture on the part of the present government. This has been done in consultation with, and with the consent of, the Government of Bangladesh. The next issue which could be mutually resolved in consultation with the state government of Bengal is the issue of sharing of river water.

**Interdependence  
of security and  
economic interests  
can be mutually  
benefitting to India  
and Bangladesh**

---

Lt Gen **DB Shekatkar**, PVSM, AVSM, VSM is a Pune-based defence analyst. The views expressed are personal.

## **Notes**

1. The author had gone to Mizoram in 1966 as part of the Indian Army's response to insurgency in 1966.
2. Lalan Tiwari, ed., *Issues in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1995), p. 22.
3. The author had tracked a group of insurgents, comprising 300 insurgents under Mao Angami who were returning from China to Nagaland from Hkampti in Myanmar to Phisami in Tuensang district of Nagaland in January 1969 . The insurgents were surrounded and disarmed under the leadership of Lt Gen Sam Manekshaw and Brig AS Vaidya.
4. Ibid.