



SECTION IV

Regional Neighbourhood



Rise of Islamic Terror in Bangladesh and Impact on North-east India

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It is estimated that the House of Saud has spent close to \$ 100 billion to promote intolerant hardline Islam, especially in the poorer countries. Apart from other countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh have received lavish financial support to replace moderate Sufi Islam with Wahhabi Islam. There is no country in the world that has spent so much money in promoting its brand of religion that ultimately is turning out to be the nursery of Islamic terrorism. Some estimates suggest that the Soviet Union spent \$ 7 billion to spread Communism post World War I till it disintegrated. But the amount of money spent by Saudi Arabia is phenomenal and has been used to bulldoze the most moderate strains of Islam and replace them with the theo-fascist Saudi variety.¹

Bangladesh, an overpopulated country, with insufficient educational infrastructure has a limited choice between educating its children in a *madrassa* or allowing them to be illiterate. The Wahhabi Tabligh-e-Jamaat has exploited this vulnerability of the people and spread its network across Bangladesh. The linkages of the Jamaat and hardliners

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with Pakistan are through two channels: repatriated Bengali officers from the Pakistan Army, who retain the old connection with Pakistan; and second, the linkages of the Jamaat, funded by Saudi Arabia, with counterparts in Pakistan. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) facilitated a meeting point for both groups to enhance the agenda of the creation of space for intolerant Wahhabi Islam and use this influence to create anti-India sentiments in Bangladesh. The focus of the ISI and Jamaat is that if they cannot create a favourable pro-Pakistan perception among the people then, at least, they should prevent pro-India sentiments, among them. The result of this proxy support by Pakistan's ISI is that it has firmly supported the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh.

The focus of the ISI and Jamaat is prevent pro-India sentiments amongst local population.

History of Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh

The Jamaat-e-Islami was raised in India in 1941 by Abul Ala Maududi, an Islamic scholar and philosopher. It was raised as a social organisation to spread Islam. The philosophy was to have a unified India built as an Islamic nation that had no space for democracy and secularism. His idea was to alter the society and nation by bringing reforms through education and government policies. It also firmly opposed the partition of India. After the partition, Maududi shifted his base to Pakistan but continued to maintain a base in Delhi and East Pakistan. The Jamaat-e-Islami was opposed to the idea of the creation of Bangladesh and it is alleged that the organisation committed atrocities against those who were demanding an independent Bangladesh and separation from Pakistan. The Jamaat felt that it was because of India that the community was being divided. During the repressive campaign by the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami was the only organisation that supported the Pakistan Army with a view to prevent the partition of Bangladesh from Pakistan. Due to its role during the war of liberation of Bangladesh, it was banned in the country and was almost wiped out. But in 1979, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government lifted

the ban and the revival of the Jamaat-e-Islami took place. The generation that suffered during the liberation campaign due to the Pakistan Army and Jamaat, comprised a staunch critique of this organisation for its deemed anti-Bangla activities. In spite of the government clampdown on the Jamaat, its activists have managed to spread its influence in the rural areas, primarily through *madrasas*. It is not only a worrying factor for Bangladesh but a challenge for India since Bengal, Assam, and Bihar have a huge Muslim population that can be subverted.

The revival of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh was not an easy task since it was considered anti-people, especially by the generation that had suffered the atrocities meted out by the Jamaat and the Pakistan Army. To justify its stand, during the freedom struggle, the Jamaat-e-Islami took the ideological line of ultra-conservative Sunni Islam (Wahhabi Islam) preached by the clerics of Saudi Arabia. It had to prove to the people that whatever it had done at that time was based on the philosophy of Islam, therefore, it required an explanation and an ideological change of mindset of the people to accept them. The main challenge for the Jamaat-e-Islami was to modify its ideology significantly, and it started taking an active part in politics. It also embarked on bringing about an Islamic revolution in the newly formed state.² Funding and ideological support came from Saudi Arabia and a large number of bright youths were recruited and sent to various Ulemas across the globe to understand and spread the Wahhabi ideology. The remittances of the expatriate Bangladeshis comprise an area of concern, as these happen to be a prime source of terrorism financing. It is estimated that about \$ 7 billion comes to the country every year via the *hundi* system—an alternative transfer method akin to the *hawala* network that persists in West Asia.³ The Jamaat-e-Islami has developed financial institutions within Bangladesh, and according to the *Dhaka Tribune*, there are ‘top firms linked to Jamaat men’ and though the relationship between these firms and the Jamaat-e-Islami cannot be confirmed, some banks and financial institutions are reported to be having Jamaat-e-Islami links.⁴ Some of the prominent financial and ideological institutions that have Jamaat-e-Islami linkages are the Islami Bank Foundation (the Islami Bank Foundation is the ‘charitable’ arm of the Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited, the notorious terror-linked Shariah bank), Ibn Sina Trust,

Fouad Al-Khateeb Charity Foundation, Rabita al-Alam al-Islami (Rabita al-Alam al-Islami is the Saudi-funded Bangladeshi branch of the Muslim World League), Agro Industrial Trust, Daily Sangram, Daily Nayadiganta, Manarat International University, International Islamic University Chittagong, Darullhsan University, Far East Islami Life Insurance Company Ltd, Takaful Islami Insurance Ltd, Kears Limited, Coral Reef Properties Ltd, Education Aid, Panjeri Publications, Allama Iqbal Sangsad, Maududi Research Sangsad, Al-Mutada Development Society and Centre for Strategy & Peace Studies. The Bangladesh government is facing a huge challenge to contain the spread of the network of the Jamaat-e-Islami, in educational institutions, business, financial sector and social organisations, and the efforts of the Jamaat are to push Bangladesh towards the Shariah, an intolerant society and an incubator of Islamic terrorism. The impact of such radicalisation will be felt by India more than any other nation in the subcontinent.

Bangladesh: A Land Bridge for Jihadis to Mainland India

The leadership of Pakistan and later Bangladesh felt that part of Assam should have merged with Pakistan/Bangladesh because of demography. Two important statements made by two leaders pre and post 1971 reveal the deep desire and intent to occupy or subvert this region. Even today, Pakistan feels that this region should not be allowed to remain stable and that is the region the ISI never left even after 1971, and it continues to maintain its presence directly, or through proxies. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the former President of Pakistan, wrote in *The Myth of Independence*, 'Our controversy with India is not on the problem of Kashmir only, there is the problem of Assam. In Assam, there are some Muslim majority districts which should have been given to Pakistan (at the time of the partition, these districts were wrongly included in India).'⁵ This sentiment was echoed not only by Bhutto—even Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, the former President of Bangladesh had similar sentiments towards Assam and he said as follows:

The population of East Bengal (Bangladesh) is increasing at an alarming speed. The inhabitants face acute shortage of land. The Bengalis need land, which can be given by Assam. Assam abounds in good forests and

beautiful scenes of nature. If some inhabitants of Bangladesh migrate to Assam and settle there permanently, they will be very happy. Actually, Assam should have been included in East Pakistan.⁶

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The policy of pushing Muslims from Bangladesh into Assam and Bengal was a manifestation of the sentiments of the leadership of East Pakistan and Bangladesh. What was a worrying factor was that for political gains, some political parties chose to remain silent on this demographic invasion that took place in Assam and Bengal. It has the potential to create a Kashmir in the east.

Bangladesh has strategic importance for the security and stability of whole of India. The geographic location of Bangladesh makes it lucrative for inimical forces to use it as a 'corridor of peril' to destabilise east India through proxies. It provides access to arms for the terrorists and insurgents of the North-east and can link up with the Maoists. Bangladesh provides a passage between north-east India and the narcotic syndicate of South-East Asia. Therefore, the issue of the demographic inversion/colonisation of the plains of Assam and even Bengal involves the deep-rooted desire to ultimately force a merger, either by causing instability or by changing the demographic pattern of Assam and Bengal so that the spillover of Bangladeshis can settle in these areas since the land and resources within Bangladesh cannot support such a large population. The connivance of Bangladesh and Pakistan has persisted in some form or the other to destabilise the north-east of India, be it *jihadi* terrorism or even the indigenous insurgent groups. Bangladesh has always been a sanctuary for the terror/insurgent groups of the north-east. Bangladesh has also continued to be the main supply route of weapons and the narcotics trade that sustain insurgency in the north-east. The current dispensation in Bangladesh has taken hard action against the terror groups operating within Bangladesh and even those who are active in India, *jihadi* and non-*jihadi*. The biggest problem in Bangladesh is the radicalisation of a segment of Bangladeshi expatriates,

with hundreds of Bangladeshi workers living in Europe, and the West and South-East Asian countries having come under the influence of *jihadi* ideologies and programmes. Their objectives are to form an Islamic state in Bangladesh and make it part of the so-called Caliphate of the Islamic State (IS).⁷

Bangladesh has become a bridge between the *jihadi* terror groups to make inroads in north-east India and West Bengal. It must be understood that the ISI, Jamaat-e-Islami, Al Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQIS) and IS are not looking at Bangladesh only but want to make inroads in north-east India, especially Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur, West Bengal, and right up to Bihar that has a sizeable Muslim population.

Terror Groups in Bangladesh

The main source of radicalisation is the Jamaat-e-Islami and most of the terror organisations in Bangladesh get their ideological indoctrination and ground support from this hardline ultra conservative Sunni Islamic organisation. Initially, terror organisations targeted the poor and illiterate and the product of *madrasas* as foot soldiers but now the focus has shifted to target and indoctrinate youths from universities, a product of the modern education system from affluent backgrounds, to simultaneously target rural and urban cities. The biggest role is being played by the Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith *madrasa* network from which they are indoctrinated into the *jihadi* philosophy, deployed to regional training/indoctrination centres, and ultimately sent to terrorist training camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).⁸ The Hizbut-Tahrir (HuT), Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen-Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) have ideological linkages with Al Qaeda and the IS. Bangladesh has become the collage and confluence of local, regional, and transnational *jihadi* organisations that find ground support and foot soldiers in the overpopulated, poor country. The HuT is seeking a united Muslim nation under the IS and that is a worrying factor. The Gulshan Bakery case that shook Bangladesh, is reported to have been carried out by the HuT. The activities of these terror organisations are not restricted to only civil organisations—they

have reportedly infiltrated some sections of the Bangladesh Army too. In 2012, the HuT with the help of Major Zia-ul-Huq, a disgruntled Bangladesh Army officer, attempted a failed coup. Major Zia managed to escape and, subsequently, became the *de-facto* chief of the ABT. This new militant outfit has been recruiting young Bangladeshis for arms training and organising specific attacks on secular rationalists and liberal intellectuals.⁹

The ABT is emerging as a major threat because of its popularity among the youth and attraction towards Al Qaeda. The outfit is politically affiliated to the Islami Chhatra Shibir—the student wing of Bangladesh’s largest Islamist party, the Jamaat-e-Islami. Interestingly, the outfit prefers more educated and elite recruits.¹⁰ This pan-Islamic group has been operating in the country with the aim of overthrowing the democratically-elected government of Sheikh Hasina. According to Dr Christine Fair, ‘In fact, as both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in South Asia have locked their sights on South Asia, Bangladesh deserves special attention.’¹¹

Cross-Border Linkages of Terror Groups

It is estimated that there are approximately 18 separate Islamist militant groups in the north-east. While some of them are active, a large number is dormant, but still gathering support and building up cadres. Some of the main active groups are the Muslim United Liberation Front of Assam (MULFA), Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), People’s United Liberation Front (PULF), Students’ Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), Adam Sena, Jihad Council, etc.¹² These groups have their footprints in Goalpara, Dhubri, Nalbari, and Barpeta districts in lower Assam, Nagaon, and Marigaon districts of central Assam and Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi districts of southern Assam’s Barak Valley, besides the *char* (alluvial islands) areas in the Brahmaputra river.¹³ Similarly, PULF has a base in Imphal valley where the Pangal Muslim community has a sizeable presence.

Intelligence agencies have long neglected the illegal migration of Bangladeshi Muslims to West Bengal. The threat of terror activities is far higher in West Bengal than in Assam or any other region of east India.

The Jamaat-e-Islami and other *jihadists* at the Kolkata rally openly threatened that West Bengal would be 'cleansed' of the enemy of Islam. This assertion is worrisome, as Islamic forces (Jamaat-e-Islami) in Bangladesh have initiated a wave of violent attacks on Hindus and Buddhists and destroyed Hindu and Buddhist homes, businesses, and places of worship.¹⁴ The worry is not from *jihadi* terror groups as much as the nexus of the political parties in West Bengal with the Jamaat-e-Islami. This is facilitating the expansion of the network of the Jamaat and *jihadi* modules in Bengal. The idea of the Jamaat-e-Islami is to spread hardline Wahhabi Islam to other parts of India, including Bihar. The Jamaat-e-Islami requires the help of terror organisations to spread its brand of Islam by coercion and cleansing. It will not be incorrect to forecast that the threat of *jihadi* terrorism in West Bengal is second only to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The Jamaat is active; its terror modules are in place, and its cadres are increasing. The footprints of the JMB exist in Burdwan and Malda and the lack of will shown by the state government to deal with the Jamaat and radicals is worrisome. According to the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), there are 58 terror modules operating in the state of West Bengal. The foot soldiers are being radicalised in both recognised and unrecognised *madrasas* of Bengal. The objective of the *jihadi* outfits in West Bengal is to provide a safe conduit for manpower resources to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹⁵

The Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) of Bangladesh, which was formed in 1992, allegedly with financial support from Osama bin Laden himself, HuJI has an estimated strength of 15,000 followers and is led by Shawkat Osman aka Maulana or Sheikh Farid, in Chittagong. Indian intelligence reports suggest that the recruits are primarily from the Quomi *madrasas*. These cadres call themselves the Taliban of Bangladesh. It is reported that the Hasina government has taken strong actions against these seminaries and cadres of HuJI and some of them have gone underground while some have escaped to India. There are also reports that some of these trained cadres have joined the ABT, JBM, and HuT.

Impact on Security Situation in the North-east and Bengal

Assam and Bengal are strategic for the security of the entire north-east. The impact of *jihadi* terror and instability will impact all the seven states of the north-east because the other six states of the north-east are connected through Assam. More worrisome will be its impact on the conventional war-fighting capabilities since the strategic lines of communication pass through the Siliguri corridor and lower Assam. Therefore, the build-up of forces, logistics support, and switching of reserves in the eventuality of a threat from China will be severely impacted. Thus, to look at instability in Assam and Bengal as a sub-conventional threat will be a miscalculation. In the light of these facts, timely actions are required to keep the *jihadi* elements under check to deal with both external and internal threats—conventional and sub-conventional—that may manifest in north-east India.

Creation of Muslim Ghettos Across Bengal and Assam

According to Bengal state police reports, 106 incidents of communal clashes were recorded in West Bengal in 2013, 42 of them being major ones where Hindus in rural areas were targeted, particularly in the border districts. The next stage will comprise cleansing of Hindus from the Muslim dominated areas of Burdwan, Malda, and South Assam. Muslim ghettos are mushrooming fast and that is forcing other community inhabitants to either leave or being forced to leave. It is a serious problem that is leading to polarisation of the society between Hindus and Muslims. The ghettos will emerge as the hubs of *jihad* activities. Peter Hammond in *Slavery, Terrorism and Islam*, warns that gradual, step-by-step demographic changes will take place in Assam and West Bengal, and it will be similar to how the plains of Assam were colonised and people lost their land and pastures to Bangladeshi squatters. As a result, they had to leave their ancestral lands to migrate as labourer elsewhere.

Spread of Influence Towards Bihar and Establishment of Land Linkages With the Maoists

The endeavour of the Jamaat-e-Islami is to ultimately spread its influence westwards to link Bihar with Bengal and Assam. This serves two purposes: one, a link with the Maoists who have already indicated that all those who help them to fight the Government of India, will support their cause, including the separatists of J&K. Second, gain access to the heartland of India for pan-India *jihadi* activities. If the *jihadis* and the Jamaat-e-Islami are not urgently stopped, it will become difficult to restrict their spread to the border states of Bengal and Assam.

Organise All Anti-India Forces to Fight Against the State

The ISI and Jamaat-e-Islami will leave no stone unturned to organise, and support, all anti-Indian forces with moral and material support. That includes insurgent groups from Manipur, the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) [NSCN(K)], and Muslim terror groups operating in Bangladesh and India, and the Maoists.

Mass Migration of Population of Hindus From Bangladesh

The Jamaat-e-Islami has considerable influence in rural Bangladesh and it wants to erase the secular structure of Bangladesh. As a result, to push the idea of *Shariah* in Bangladesh, these *jihadi* forces, under the flag of the Jamaat-e-Islami, have initiated a wave of violent attacks on Hindus and Buddhists, and destroyed Hindu and Buddhist homes, businesses, and places of worship.¹⁶ The overall idea is to force the eviction of the non-Islamic population from Bangladesh. As a result, the Hindu population has no option but to take refuge in India. According to the 1951 census, in the country then known as East Bengal, Hindus comprised 22 per cent of the population. In 1974, the figure came down to 14 per cent, and the last 2011 census suggests that the followers of the Hindu faith consist of only 8.4 per cent of the population.¹⁷ The minority community in Bangladesh is fast losing its homeland and being forced to become refugees in their own homeland or in India.

Conclusion

The north-east region of India has suffered for 70 long years due to insurgency and self-determination movements. As the situation was stabilising and becoming somewhat peaceful, the threat of *jihadi* terrorism began making inroads into the north-east and West Bengal. The emerging situation in Bangladesh and its fallout on north-east India and West Bengal has serious security concerns for India. It threatens the peace, stability, and security of these states and also impacts India's defence plans to deal with the threat from China in the Eastern Theatre.

More than Assam, the situation in Bengal is fast deteriorating since it acts as a bridge to link up with Bihar and the Red Corridor. There is no scope for complacency in the light of the fact that it affects peace and stability in east India.

The ISI of Pakistan is working overtime to establish its network across the entire east India through the Jamaat and indigenous insurgent groups. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) government in Bengal has shown a lack of will to curtail the spread of the Jamaat's activities in Bengal. This is willy-nilly giving a free hand to the ISI to manipulate and subvert the Muslim population in Bengal. The government needs to expose the linkages of the ISI with the Jamaat. It will also expose the political parties if they are in cohort with the Jamaat for political reasons. The encirclement of India from the east should not be taken lightly, since it has serious implications for the security of the entire east India.

Notes

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