

Chapter 7 A short history of Bangladesh

The division of Bengal under the British colonial rule

As we have seen so far, Bengal produced many prominent people in various fields and greatly contributed to the Indian independence movement. However, India gained its freedom not as a united country, as Tagore, Rash Behari Bose and Subhas Chandra Bose had eagerly hoped, but ended up divided into two independent states, Pakistan and India. In the conclusion to this book, I would like to briefly introduce the history of my homeland Bangladesh, which was most severely affected by the tragedy of the divided independence and consequently broke free from Pakistan at an enormous cost.

First, the term Bengal refers to the region of East India, which includes the present West Bengal district and Bangladesh. This region was arbitrarily divided by the British colonial authorities in 1905, as mentioned in the Introduction to this book.

Bengal is a rich delta formed by the big rivers, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, the Padma and the Meghna, originating in the Himalayas and flowing into the Bay of Bengal. The region rich land produces such an abundance of agricultural products that it attracted the attention of the British Empire, which from the middle of the 17th century onwards, established commercial bases of the East India Company in Surat, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta and started the Indian trade. Since the beginning of the 18th century, as the Mughal Empire rule over the region declined, Britain gradually established control over the land. The then Bengali Governor in power Siraji-ud-Dawlah protested that the illicit trade conducted by the East India Company and its workers was a serious blow to the Bengali economy and demanded that tariff should be duly paid. The British side high-handedly refused this request. Upon the refusal of the tariff payment, in 1756, Siraj attacked the British troops stationed in Calcutta and made them flee. Reportedly, this was the worst defeat in the history of the British colonial rule. Britain counterattacked and set up various conspiracies and divisions within Siraj's army and eventually the latter became dysfunctional.

In 1757, in the Battle of Plassey, Siraj was defeated, captured, and killed. Through this battle, the British East India Company gained full control over the Bengal district and established the foundation of the colonial rule over the entire India. Afterwards, Britain put South India under her control through the Anglo-Mysore War (1767-1799) and suppressed the Central and West India by the Anglo-Maratha Wars (1775-1818) and conquered Punjab by the Anglo-Sikh War (1845-1849). Thus, by the middle of the 19th century, Britain put all of India under her rule. Britain succeeded in colonizing the entire India through conspiracy and military force.

The British colonial policy of India started from the Battle of Plassey and the British industrial revolution also started in the same period, the 1750s. Within nearly 200 years after that, Britain accumulated the capital of the Bank of England, which became the British central bank, based on enormous monetary profits and treasures extracted from India, especially from the Bengal district, together with the agricultural products, which were the gift from the rich land, such as spices, tea, and jute. In other words, the prosperity of England was founded on the exploitation of the riches of Bengal.

Separation from India and independence of Bangladesh

In August 1947, India became independent, and Bangladesh with its Islamic majority population was incorporated into Pakistan and came to be called East Pakistan, far apart on the opposite sides of India.

However, it was extremely difficult to run a state composed of two peoples completely different from each other in culture and language and geographically divided into east and west, the only common factor being religion. In addition, at that time, nearly 20 to 30 percent of the population in East Pakistan were Hindus and the Muslims there were culturally affected by Hinduism.

The politics in Pakistan after independence was in confusion. Jinnah, the leader at the time of independence died of illness in 1948 before he had time to establish a workable political system. Liaquat Ali Khan, who succeeded Jinnah, was assassinated in 1951. The confusion continued and disappointment spread among the people until 1958, when Muhammad Ayub Khan seized the government in a military coup d'état.

In East Pakistan, the situation was much worse. After India and Pakistan became separately independent, East Pakistan was under exploitation by West Pakistan, which was the political center. The devastating situation was essentially the same as it had been during the period of the British colonial rule.

Moreover, to people speaking Bengali in East Pakistan, the Pakistani Government implemented language control, designating Urdu as the only official language. Students at the University of Dhaka began protesting against this linguistic discrimination. The Pakistani Government warned them that if they held a protest rally, they would be immediately shot to death on account of anti-government activity. Nevertheless, students resolutely held a rally on February 21, 1952, and there were several deaths by police shootings. Largely triggered by this incident, the movement to protect the Bengali language developed into an enthusiastic movement for the independence of Bangladesh.

In honor and memory of those young people who dared to risk their lives to protect their mother

language, the UNESCO designated this date, February 21, as “International Mother Language Day” in 1999.

Even after that, however, the autonomy of East Pakistan was hardly acknowledged and the discontent mounted further among the Bengali people who were literally under the colonial rule of West Pakistan. And the defeat in the Indo-Pakistan War, which started in 1962 over the territorial rights over the Kashmir district, accelerated the nationwide criticism against the Government and increased the demands for a democratic state. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the East Pakistan Muslim League and the Awami League, a political body, kept appealing about the dire situation in East Pakistan, notwithstanding the frequent arrests he suffered.

In November 1970, just before the general election for the Parliament of Pakistan, a huge cyclone hit East Pakistan. Deaths caused by floods reportedly amounted from 200,000 to 300,000. However, the Pakistani Government failed to take appropriate relief measures for the victims and the mass media in East Pakistan most severely criticized the central government.

Mujibur Rahman himself made a speech, claiming that East Pakistan should no longer be under the control of West Pakistan and in the election held in December, the Awami League, asserting the solid autonomy of East Pakistan, won 160 seats out of the 162 allocated to East Pakistan. With this overwhelming approval rating in the background, Mujibur Rahman asked that East Pakistan be granted higher level of autonomy, including the request that Pakistan become a federal state consisting of the two provinces of East and West.

However, the Pakistani Government did not accept this request and on March 25, 1971, the Pakistani Army attacked East Pakistan at one sweep and declared martial law. Intellectuals and anti-government activists were brutally murdered one after another. The leader Rahman was arrested, confined, and then taken to West Pakistan.

On the next day, March 26, over the International Bangladesh Radio Broadcast, Major Ziaur Rahman read the statement of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on his behalf, “Today, Bangladesh became independent. Let us resolutely fight until we win the final victory.” On April 10, the Awami League officially declared the independence of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and Mujibur Rahman in custody became President. Henceforth began the Bangladeshi Independence War.

As mentioned in the dialogue with Mr. Pema Gyalpo at the back of this book, when the war broke out, various efforts of support came from India, including Tibetan volunteers, and they fought with the

Bangladeshi liberation army hastily composed of deserters from the East Pakistani Army, civilian volunteers, and the police. A voluntary body called Freedom Fighters had recruiting facilities and training units in towns along the Indian border and out of the confusion caused by the civil war, nearly ten million refugees headed toward India.

India declared her determination to take every measure possible in order to avoid the crisis and save the people of Bangladesh, appealing to the international community for support to Bangladesh. In the third Indo-Pakistan War in December, India defeated the Pakistani Army in about two weeks and made the Pakistani troops stationed in Bangladesh surrender, leading to a ceasefire.

On January 8, 1972, Mujibur Rahman was released from detention and on January 10, he made a speech in Dhaka amid enthusiastic welcome from people, "Now, our country is free. My golden Bengal is free. My dream has come true." On January 12, he became Prime Minister.

Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League established the new nation's four principles of "nationalism, socialism, democracy and the separation of politics and religion," under the influence of India, which helped Bangladesh become independent and of the U.S.S.R. which was in close relationship with India at that time. Socialism mentioned then referred not to the ideological concept but to the realistic economic policy free from the economical control by other countries and in need for building the state-run economy with the national capital yet to be established.

In January 1972, East Germany and other East European nations, as well as the U.S.S.R. recognized Bangladesh as a state. Among the Western countries, Japan became the first to recognize the Bangladeshi statehood on February 10. In the diplomatic history of Japan, it was the first time that Japan made her own diplomatic decision prior to others. On July 2, Pakistan recognized the independence of Bangladesh by the Simla Agreement and Bangladesh accomplished her independence both in name and substance.

At the time of declaring its independence, Bangladesh was extremely exhausted and in disarray after the civil war that had lasted nine months. The independence war reportedly resulted in the deaths of 3 million victims, many died in massacres committed by the Pakistani Army, others from starvation among refugees or from illness and other causes.

In Bangladesh, during the independence war and after the independence was achieved, Japan enthusiastically rendered support, which came from various levels of the private sector, the government, Diet members and the economic community. Since 1970, when Bangladesh was severely

damaged by the cyclone, various fundraising and relief activities were undertaken. Diet member Hayakawa Takashi of the Liberal Democratic Party enthusiastically supported Bangladesh from the very early stage. Mr. Fukiura Tadamasu went to Bangladesh in 1971 as the Red Cross representative stationed in Bangladesh and published an excellent book of record, *Blood and Dirt—Tragedy of Independence of Bangladesh*, which has been translated in Bangladesh as a valuable document.

In 1973, the Japanese Government invited Prime Minister Rahman, founding father of Bangladesh, to Japan as an official guest. During the meeting between Prime Minister Rahman and the then Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei, it was decided to send a mission to support the Bangladeshi economy. The mission was to be led by Nagano Shigeo, President of the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and attended by the Presidents of Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Mitsubishi Corporation, Tokyu Corporation, Asahi Kasei, Nissho Iwai (currently Sojitz Corporation) and Directors from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Treasury, of International Trade and Industry and others concerned.

On the other hand, China at that time supported the Pakistani Government and did not recognize Bangladesh's statehood. Under such a circumstance, we can hardly find any incidence in postwar years in which Japan coped with a diplomatic issue on her own to such an extent and supported a newly independent country of her own free will. There are supposedly many reasons, but we cannot discuss it without considering the close relationship Japan cherished with those great figures that Bengal produced, Tagore, Rash Behari Bose, Subhas Chandra Bose and Justice Pal. However, when it comes to the contribution and cooperation Japan made at the time of the independence of Bangladesh, very little has been known to the general public up to now.

Unstable political situation remaining even after the independence

However, notwithstanding the improved international relationship, the political stability or national development did not progress smoothly.

Although Mujibur Rahman was a superb independence fighter, the establishment of the new state was not at all an easy task to accomplish. Bangladesh experienced independence for the second time in less than a quarter century after the separate independence of India and Pakistan and there was hardly enough economic strength left to stand independently as a state. In addition to inflation, unemployment and food shortage, there were damages caused by frequent floods and the double influence of the two-time oil shocks, which further aggravated the grievous economic situation in Bangladesh. Domestic politics was in extreme confusion and together with cases of corruption among members of the Awami League Party and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism supporting communism and Pakistan, Mujibur was not competent enough to successfully solve those economic and political problems.

Mujibur Rahman forcibly implemented power politics relying on the military and the police, introduced martial law and became President. President Mujibur formed the BAKSAL (the Awami League of Farmers and Workers), a political coalition of four parties including the Awami League, and became the head of the coalition and tried to restore the domestic order by implementing hardline policy such as banning all political parties except BAKSAL. However, things did not improve, but on the contrary, criticism against Mujibur Rahman increased among the military because they had contributed to the independence but lost the liberty and democracy they had once won at a high price in the struggle for independence.

Consequently, on August 15, 1975, Mujibur Rahman was killed together with his wife, their three sons with their two wives, his younger brother with his wife and their son in a coup d'état led by seven young officers and attempted by an Army unit. At the residence of Mujibur's nephew who was Mujibur's aide, the entire family were killed. At that time, Mujibur's two daughters were staying abroad, and they were the only survivors of the brutal incident. The older of the two sisters is Sheikh Hasina, the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Thus, Mujibur Rahman, called by people the "Founding Father," perished in a coup d'état. In Rahman's residence, the murder scene has been preserved as it was and at present is open to the public as a memorial museum.

Immediately after President Rahman was assassinated, Musutaku Ahmed of the Awami League became President. However, this Musutaku was reportedly said to be one of the ringleaders of the assassination of Mujibur Rahman and he prohibited activities of the Awami League although he himself belonged to the same political party. Consequently, the leaders of the Party either went underground or exiled themselves overseas for the safety of their lives. Four persons who had long been Mujibur Rahman's comrades and leaders of the independence movement were arrested by the government of the coup d'état and executed in prison without trial.

This government was toppled by another military coup d'état attempted by a military man named Kaled Musharraf on November 5, 1975, and on November 7, the anti-Musharraf military men rose again and liberated Ziaur Rahman who was at the time in custody and appointed him their leader. Through the third coup d'état, the BNP (Bangladesh National Party) formed a government led by Ziaur Rahman and thus military dictatorship started.

However, in 1981, President Ziaur Rahman was assassinated, and Ershad, then the chief of staff of the Bangladesh Army, assumed power. In 1983, Ershad became President by obtaining the administrative power without going through the due process. Thenceforth started the military dictatorship, which

lasted nine years. Under this dictatorship, Islamic fundamentalists became ministers, going hand in hand with the military personnel, revoking the national principle of the separation of politics and religion. At the same time, the Awami League was prohibited from acting as a political party and this policy was introduced to deny the achievements of Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh and her first President, and to bury his name.

Political and economic stability brought by Sheikh Hasina's government

Sheikh Hasina, Mujibur Rahman's eldest daughter who survived her father's assassination, had been elected the leader of the Awami League in India, where she exiled herself. In 1981, she returned home to Bangladesh and led the activities of the prohibited Awami League.

Under such circumstances, people's discontent against the military dictatorship developed from a students' movement to a nationwide movement for democracy. In 1990, President Ershad was forced into resignation. This event hardly attracted Japanese people's attention, but it was one of the successful movements for democracy in Asia, which happened concurrently with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In March of the following year, 1991, a provisional government was organized, and a general election was held. Ershad sent candidates from the Jatiya Party with his supporters, only to lose by a large margin. In this election, the BNP (Bangladesh National Party) beat the Awami League and Khaleda Zia, widow of the late Ziaur Rahman and chairperson and leader of the BNP became the first female prime minister of Bangladesh. Through the Constitutional reform at that time, Bangladesh changed from a presidential system to a system of a parliamentary cabinet with the term of five years. Thenceforth, fundamentally, through the general election held every fifth year, government changed hands alternately between the two major parties, the Bangladesh National Party, and the Amami League Party.

In the general election held in 1996, the Awami League won back the government after twenty-two years. Sheikh Hasina became prime minister after long aspiration. The newly elected Sheikh Hasina revoked the law prohibiting the trial of the case of her father's assassination at the Parliament, and later the trial of the assassination of Mujibur Rahman was held and in 2010, five assassins were executed, following the verdict.

In the next general election held in 2001, the BNP won the majority seats, asserting the coalition government with the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic fundamentalist party, and Khaleda Zia became prime minister for the second time. Under her administration, the bombing incident of Dhaka occurred in

2004, in which Sheikh Hasina was seriously injured in the ear and the party leader of the Female Awami League and several members of the Awami League were killed. This incident was reportedly perpetrated by the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami.

In 2006, the general election was slated, but the BNP and the Awami League confronted each other over the date of the election and the issue of candidates, each asking for the advantageous conditions to their own party and eventually, it became practically impossible to hold the election and the Army came out to take control over the situation and a provisional government was organized. Three years later, in 2009, the general election was finally held and the Awami League won the election. Since then, Sheikh Hasina has been prime minister for the three consecutive terms, to this day.

In the 2014 general election, under the slogan of “Digital Bangladesh,” a coalition government led by the Awami League and the Jatiya Party, the Communist Party and other parties was established and has remained in power until today.

Bangladesh has kept growing economically due to the economic policy implemented by Sheikh Hasina’s government and in 2014 the country entered a phase of high economic growth and is about to graduate from the class of latecomer developing countries. From the time of her independence to the present, Bangladesh has been greatly supported by Japan in various ways, such as gratuitous financial aid, loans, and technical cooperation in various fields, through the ODA (official development aid), NGO/NPO corporations and others. In addition, there are investments from Japanese companies. I would like to conclude this book by conveying to all of you, Japanese people, how deeply grateful I am as a Bangladeshi to Japan for her great contribution to my country Bangladesh.