

Mother's role in the 1971 war

Sri Aurobindo retired from active political life in 1910. But this did not mean, as it was then supposed, that he had retired into some height of spiritual experience devoid of any further interest in the world or in the fate of India. It could not mean that, for the very principle of his Yoga was not only to realise the Divine and attain to a complete spiritual consciousness, but also to take all life and all world activity into the scope of this spiritual consciousness and action and to base life on the Spirit and give it a spiritual meaning.

Consequently even in his retirement, Sri Aurobindo kept a close watch on all that was happening in the world and in India and actively intervened whenever necessary, but solely with a spiritual force and silent spiritual action; for it is part of the experience of those who have advanced far in Yoga that besides the ordinary forces and activities of the mind and life and body in Matter, there are other forces and powers that can act and do act from behind and from above; there is also a spiritual dynamic power which can be possessed by those who are advanced in the spiritual consciousness, though all do not care to possess or, possessing, to use it, and this power is greater than any other and more effective. It was this force, which, as soon as he had attained to it, he used, at first only in a limited field of personal work, but afterwards in a constant action upon the world forces. He had no reason to be dissatisfied with the results or to feel the necessity of any other kind of action. Twice however he found it advisable to take in addition other action of a public kind. The first was in relation to the Second World War. At the beginning he did not actively concern himself with it, but when it appeared as if Hitler would crush all the forces opposed to him and Nazism dominate the world, he began to intervene. He declared himself publicly on the side of the Allies, made some financial contributions in answer to the appeal for funds and encouraged those who sought his advice to enter the army or share in the war effort. Inwardly, he put his spiritual force behind the Allies from the moment of Dunkirk when everybody was expecting the immediate fall of England and the definite triumph of Hitler, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the rush of German victory almost immediately arrested and the tide of war begin to turn in the opposite direction. This he did, because he saw that behind Hitler and Nazism were dark Asuric forces and that their success would mean the enslavement of mankind to the tyranny of evil, and a set-back to the course of evolution and especially to the spiritual evolution of mankind: it would lead also to the enslavement not only of Europe but of Asia, and in it India, an enslavement far more terrible than any this country had ever endured, and the undoing of all the work that had been done for her liberation. It was this reason also that induced him to support publicly the Cripps offer and to press the Congress leaders to accept it. He had not, for various reasons, intervened with his spiritual force against the Japanese aggression until it became evident that Japan intended to attack and even invade and conquer India. He allowed certain letters he had written in support of the war affirming his views of the Asuric nature and inevitable outcome of Hitlerism to become public. He supported the Cripps offer because by its acceptance India and Britain could stand united against the Asuric forces and the solution of Cripps could be used as a step towards independence. When negotiations failed, Sri Aurobindo returned to his reliance on the use of spiritual force alone against the aggressor and had the satisfaction of seeing the tide of Japanese victory, which had till then swept everything before it, change immediately into a tide of rapid, crushing and finally

immense and overwhelming defeat. He had also after a time the satisfaction of seeing his previsions about the future of India justify themselves so that she stands independent with whatever internal difficulties.

It was in this context that on August 15 1947, he declared in his message:

*“As a mystic, I take this **identification, not as a coincidence** or fortuitous accident, but as a sanction and seal of the Divine **Power** which guides my steps on the work with which I began life. Indeed almost all the world movements which I hoped to see fulfilled in my lifetime, though at that time they looked like **impossible** dreams, I can observe on this day either approaching fruition **or initiated** and on the way to their achievement”.*

We have mentioned all this just to show that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were continually keeping an eye on world events and were using their force to guide the world in the desired direction. In this brief article, we are illustrating one such intervention by the Mother. This was during the war in Bangladesh in 1971.

The Bangladesh Crisis

The partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 created two independent countries: India and Pakistan. India, which became independent on Aug. 15, 1947, stood for an equitable polity based on the universally accepted idea that all men were created equal and should be treated as such. Pakistan, which officially came into existence a day earlier, was based on the premise that Hindus and Muslims of the Subcontinent constituted two different nationalities and could not co-exist. The Partition created two different countries with most Muslim majority areas of undivided India going to the newly created nation, Pakistan (Land of the Pure). Pakistan was originally made up of two distinct and geographically unconnected parts termed West and East Pakistan. West Pakistan was made up of a number of races including the Punjabis (the most numerous), Sindhis, Pathans, Baluchis, Mohajirs (Muslim refugees from India) and others. East Pakistan, on the other hand, was much more homogeneous and had an overwhelming Bengali-speaking population.

The Roots of Discord

Although the Eastern wing of Pakistan was more populous than the Western one, political power since independence rested with the Western elite. This caused considerable resentment in East Pakistan and a charismatic Bengali leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, most forcefully articulated that resentment by forming an opposition political party called the Awami League and demanding more autonomy for East Pakistan within the Pakistani Federation. In 1969 November, Yahya Khan who was the President of Pakistan announced that in the end of 1970 he would hold elections in the whole of Pakistan based on universal suffrage. The election results were stunning. In East Pakistan, the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujib Rehman won 160 seats out of 162. In West Pakistan Bhutto's People's party won 81 out of the 138 seats. In all fairness, the Sheikh should have been Prime Minister of Pakistan, or at least the ruler of his province. Both Yahya Khan and Bhutto were unwilling to accept the results of East Pakistan. As a result the convening of the Assembly was delayed. On 1 March 1971, Yahya Khan announced that the meeting of the National Assembly had been postponed sine die and the Maj Gen Yakub Khan had been appointed the new governor of East Pakistan. Meanwhile a secret reinforcement of troops from West Pakistan to the East via Sri Lanka began.

The Awami League reacted with a campaign of civil disobedience. Yahya then announced that the National Assembly would meet on March 25 and at the same time replaced Maj Gen Yakub Khan by Lt Gen Tikka Khan. During all this time army reinforcements continued to pour in. Yahya Khan arrived in March in East Pakistan to conduct negotiations with the Awami League. Even while negotiations were going on Yahya Khan was visiting army installations and meeting army officers in the cantonment. It was decided during this visit that the meeting of the National Assembly would be postponed. On March 23, known as Pakistan Day, the Awami League declared independence and Bangladesh flags were hoisted all over Dacca. The confusion was soon over. In the early hours of 26 March, Tikka Khan issued orders to crackdown on the people of East Pakistan. Troops began to move into the city of Dacca at 2300 hours on 25 March.

A message was heard on the radio from Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. He said: "This may be my last message. From today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh to resist the Army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation Army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved." Dacca came under the control of the Pakistan Army in a few hours. Mujib was arrested in the early hours of 26 March. Genocide of the people of East Bengal had begun.

Origins of the Crisis

The dawn of 1971 saw a great human tragedy unfolding in erstwhile East Pakistan. Entire East Pakistan was in revolt. In the West, General Yahya Khan, who had appointed himself President in 1969, had given the job of pacifying East Pakistan to his junior, General Tikka Khan. The crackdown of Mar. 25, 1971, ordered by Tikka Khan, left thousands of Bengalis dead and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was arrested the next day. The same day, the Pakistani Army began airlifting two of its divisions plus a brigade strength formation to its Eastern Wing. Attempts to disarm the Bengali troops were not entirely successful and within weeks of the March 25 massacres, many former Bengali officers and troops of the Pakistani Army had joined Bengali resistance fighters in different parts of East Pakistan.

The Pakistani Army conducted several crackdowns in different parts of Bangladesh, leading to massive loss of civilian life. The details of those horrific massacres, in which defenceless people were trapped and machine-gunned, is part of Bangladeshi history. Survivors compare it to the Nazi extermination of Jews.

At the same time, the Pakistani Administration in Dhaka thought it could pacify the Bengali peasantry by appropriating the land of the Hindu population and gifting it to Muslims. While this did not impress the peasantry, it led to the exodus of more than eight million refugees (more than half of them Hindus) to neighbouring India. West Bengal was the worst affected by the refugee problem and the Indian government was left holding the enormous burden. Repeated appeals by the Indian government failed to elicit any response from the international community and by April 1971, the then Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, decided that the only solution lay in helping the Bengali freedom fighters, especially the Mukti Bahini, to liberate East Pakistan, which had already been re-christened Bangladesh by its people. Pakistan felt it could dissuade India from helping the Mukti Bahini by being provocative. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) in East Pakistan took to attacking suspected Mukti Bahini camps located inside Indian Territory in the state of West Bengal. In the Western and Northern sectors too, occasional

clashes, some of them quite bloody, took place. Pakistan suggested that should India continue with its plans it should expect total war as in 1965. Only this time, the Pakistanis would concentrate their forces in the West and thereby aim at capturing as much as Indian Territory as possible. The Indians, on the other hand, would be fighting a war on two fronts (while at the same time keeping a watchful eye on the Chinese borders). Given this scenario, the Pakistanis felt that India at best would be able to capture some territory in East Pakistan and lose quite a bit in the West. In the end, the Pakistanis knew that the Western powers would intervene to stop the war and what would matter was who had the most of the other's territory. Confident that another war would be as much of a stalemate as the 1965 Conflict, the Pakistanis got increasingly bold and finally on Dec. 3, 1971, reacted with a massive coordinated air strike on several Indian Air Force stations in the West. At midnight, the Indian Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, in a broadcast to the nation declared that India was at war with Pakistan. As her words came on in million of Indian homes across the Subcontinent, the men at the front were already engaged in bitter combat...

The war lasted for 13 days precisely. To cut a long story short, the Pakistan Army in the East surrendered on Dec. 16, and on Dec. 17 India declared a cease-fire.

The Mother's position

Let us now look at the position of the Mother regarding the Bangladesh problem. On 4th April, just 7 days after the crackdown, Mother sent a message to Indira Gandhi, "The urgent recognition of Bangladesh is imperative."

Sometime later, in June 1971, The Mother had written in a letter to a disciple:

La disparition du Pakistan est inevitable; elle aurait pu deja se produire, mais l'ignorance humaine l'a retardee.

The English translation is as follows:

The disappearance of Pakistan is inevitable; this could have already happened, but human ignorance has retarded it.

*La disparition du Pakistan
est - inevitable ; elle aurait pu
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As already seen, the conflict had its genesis in March when the Pakistani President and his tough military regime, moved to crush the East Pakistani movement for greater autonomy, outlawed the Awami League, which had just won a majority in the nation's first free election, arrested its leader, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, and launched a repressive campaign that turned into a civil war with East Pakistan's Bengalis fighting to set up an independent Bangla Desh (Bengal Nation).

Nearly 1,000,000 people were killed and 10 million refugees streamed into India. "We have borne the heaviest of burdens," Mrs. Gandhi said, "and withstood the greatest of pressure in a tremendous effort to urge the world to help in bringing about a peaceful solution and preventing the annihilation of an entire people whose only crime was to vote democratically. But the world ignored the basic causes and concerned itself only with certain repercussions. Today the war in Bangla Desh has become a war on India."

Mrs Indira Gandhi had visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to meet the Mother a few times. The first time was in September 1955 with her father, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru who was then Prime Minister of India. Later she came to the Ashram in 1969 just after Shri V.V Giri became the President of India. Her third visit was in February 1971 before the general elections. It is reported that she sought Mother's blessings for the election and she won a thumping victory getting more than two thirds of the seats.

Almost immediately after being sworn in as Prime Minister of India, the crisis in East Pakistan erupted. Within days of the onset of the crisis, Mother sent a message to Mrs Indira Gandhi on 4 April: "The urgent recognition of Bangladesh is imperative."

The Mother's role

We shall now turn our attention to the role played by the Mother through the instrumentation of an officer of the Indian Army. Lt Col PC Bhalla was a Signal Officer and had been a disciple of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo since the early 50s. During the Bangladesh war, he was posted in the Eastern Command in Calcutta and was the Signal officer in charge of Intelligence. He had direct access to Lt General Jacob who was then Chief of Staff, Eastern Command. At that time the Eastern Army Commander was Lt General Jagjit Singh Arora. General Sam Manekshaw who was the previous Eastern Army Commander was now the Chief of Army Staff.

It was quite well known in some circles that Mother had sent a message to Mrs Indira Gandhi asking her to recognise Bangladesh. But for some reasons Mrs Gandhi could not recognise Bangladesh immediately as that would have meant war with Pakistan and the Army was not quite prepared for it.

Yet Mrs Indira Gandhi was eager to recognise Bangladesh. So, sometime in April, she called a cabinet meeting to which General Manekshaw was invited. As we shall see from the following interview of General Manekshaw, the Army was not prepared for a war immediately.

"Mrs Indira Gandhi telling Manekshaw, "Look at this, - so many are coming in -there is a telegram from the Chief Minister of Assam, a telegram from... What are you doing about it?", she said to me.

I said nothing. What has it got to do with me?

She said, "Can't you do something? "Can't you do something? Why don't you do something?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to march in".

I said, "that means war". And she said, "I don't mind if it is war".

So I sat down and said, "Have you read the Bible?"

Sardar Swaran Singh said. "What has the Bible got to do with it?"

"In the First Book, The First Chapter, the First Paragraph of the Bible, God said, 'Let there be Light' and there was light. So you feel, Let there be war and there shall be war. Are you ready? I certainly am not ready".

Then I said, "I will tell you what is happening? It is now the end of April. In a few days' time the monsoon will break and in East Pakistan, when it rains, the rivers become like oceans. If you stand on one side, you can't see the other. I would be confined to the roads. The Air Force would not be able to support me and the Pakistanis would thrash me - that's one. Secondly my armoured divisions, is in the Babina area, another one in Secunderabad. We are now harvesting. I will require every vehicle, every truck, all the road space, all the railway space to move my soldiers and you will not be able to move our crops" and I turned to Fakruddin Ali Ahmed, the Agriculture Minister and said, "If there is famine in India, they will blame you. I would not be there to take the blame". Then I turned around and said, "My armoured division which is supposed to be my strike force has got 12 tanks which are operational out of the whole lot".

Chavan asked, 'Sam, why only 12?'

I said, "Sir, because you are the Finance Minister. I have been asking, pleading for months and you said that you have got no money. That's why".

Then I said, "Prime Minister, if in 1962 your father had asked me as Army Chief and not General Thapar and your father had said, 'Throw the Chinese out', I would have turned around and told him. 'Look, there are problems'. Now I am telling you what the problems are. If you still want me to go ahead, Prime Minister, I will guarantee you 100% defeat. Now, give me your orders".

Then Jagjeevan Ram said, "Sam, Maan Jao Na".

I said, "I have given my professional view now. Now the Government must take a decision".

The Prime Minister did not say anything, she was red in the face and said, 'Achcha, char baje milenge'.

Everybody walked out, I, being the junior most, was the last to leave and I smiled at her. "Chief, sit down".

So, I said, "Prime Minister, before you open your mouth, do you want me to send in my resignation on the grounds of mental health or physical?"

She said, "Oh, sit down Sam. Everything you told me is true".

"Yes. Look it is my job to fight. It is my job to fight to win. Are you ready? I certainly am not ready. Have you internally got everything ready? Internationally have you got everything ready? I don't think so. I know what you want, but I must do it in my own time and I guarantee you 100 percent success. But I want to make it quite clear. There must be one commander. I don't mind, I will work under the BSF, under the CRPF, under anybody you like. But I will not have a Soviet telling me what to do and I must have one political master who will give me instructions. I do not want the refugee ministry, home ministry, defence ministry all telling me. Now make up your mind."

She said, 'All right Sam, nobody will interfere, you will be in command.'

However, Lt Col Bhalla was not at all happy with the situation and was very disturbed that India had not yet recognised Bangladesh. Being close to Gen Jacob, he spoke to him several times without any result. So he wrote to Shri Madhav Pandit, one of the secretaries of the Mother about his feelings. In June he came to Pondicherry and had a darshan of the Mother. No words were exchanged but he felt a little more relaxed and at peace.

On his return to Calcutta, he spoke once again to Gen Arora and Gen Jacob asking them to invade Bangladesh. This time too there was no apparent result.

In August Lt Col Bhalla came to Pondicherry once again, this time with his family and had a darshan of the Mother. Mother blessed them all very sweetly and asked Panditji to tell Bhalla to come again the next day for darshan, this time all by himself. On the second darshan, Mother looked at him long and concentrated on him and gave him a sweet smile and her blessings.

After coming down from Mother's room, Madhav Pandit made a remark to Lt Col Bhalla: "Now the work will be done".

Bhalla returned to Calcutta charged with great energy and a lot of hope. But he found that the commanders were all a bit depressed and lacking in confidence on the situation as it was developing in East Bengal.

Charged with energy and almost a sense of mission, he spoke to General Arora and General Jacob and asked them to write to Mother. He told them that it was Mother's war and all they needed to do was to pass on their problems to the Mother. In the meanwhile he wrote to Panditji requesting him to send a few blessing packets. These packets were duly sent to Lt Col Bhalla who gave them to five senior generals of the Eastern Command, namely: Lt Gen Arora, Lt Gen Jacob, Lt Gen Raina, Lt Gen Sagat Singh, and the Commander of 4 Corps.

It seems that Lt Gen Jacob, while talking to Col Bhalla saw the ring with Sri Aurobindo's symbol on his hand and found it similar to the Jewish symbol. He was impressed and that prompted him to write to the Mother. Later Col Bhalla asked Panditji to send five more blessing packets. These were duly passed on to Brigadier Sethna who was the BGS, Lt General Sen, Lt General Hira and 2 other generals. As a result of all this, there was suddenly a feeling of confidence that began to grow in the Eastern Army.

We quote from a book of Maj Gen KK Tiwari, who was then the Chief Signals Officer in Eastern Command:

"It was in the third quarter of 1971, I must have been in a reflective mood one day in my office, when one of my officers, a Lt Col Bhalla - who had received his training for Signals on commissioning under me, came to see me. He asked why I was so pensive and worried, which he said was unusual for me. By that time I had been told of Top Secret Plans in outline. So I said to him, "Chum, one cannot share these things with you at present but if you had some of the problems I am facing with no solutions in sight, and when you have been given a definite no to your requests for help by all concerned, and yet you have responsibilities to discharge, you too would be more pensive." He was very quick in his reply - he had obviously come prepared for this, being a long time devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He said, "Sir, you are my old instructor, so I should not be advising you. But I have a humble submission. Whatever your worries and problems, write to the Mother in Pondicherry and ask for Her blessings and all will be well."

I did not accept the suggestion immediately. Sri Aurobindo, of course, was no more, and I hesitated a little to ask for blessings from His French lady successor. But on deeper reflection, a brief letter was sent to the Mother seeking Her blessings for my (unspecified) work. In a few days a blessings packet was received from Her. Unknown to others the same officer had gone around to almost all the top brass of HQ Eastern Command from the Army Commander on down to other heads of staff and Arms and Services like me, and we had all received the Mother's blessings. And it was amazing how the problems began to get resolved in a strange and inexplicable way. What appeared at first as hurdles, would clear up somehow.

For the first time in its history, a regular, well organised and a much better equipped army laid down arms before the Indian Army, in an unconditional surrender on 16 December 1971 in Dacca. There were nearly 95,000 fully armed Pakistani soldiers under their commander in Chief, Lt Gen Niazi who formally surrendered to Lt Gen Aurora. I believe it was an external latent 'force' which came into action for India's help; I prefer to refer to it as the 'Divine' intervention."

As is evident from the above description, Lt Col Bhalla had by this time got many blessing packets from Pondicherry and had distributed them to senior officers in the Eastern Army.

In September, the photographs of Gen Arora and Gen Bhalla were sent to the Mother. She saw the photos and sent blessings to them. It will be of interest to note that Gen Jacob carries the blessing packet even today with him in his pocket. Another interesting point was that the Mother had asked for a map of Bangladesh sometime in October and she kept it on her table in front of her. She concentrated daily on that map.

Things were hotting up on the Eastern front. Sometime in the end of November, General Arora called Lt Col Bhalla and informed him that the Indian Army was planning to attack East Pakistan on 5 December and that he wanted Mother's blessings. Col Bhalla as usual, asked him write a letter to the Mother. Lt Gen Arora wrote a letter explaining briefly the position and asked Lt Col Bhalla to take it to Pondicherry and hand it over to the Mother. As a result, on 30 November Lt Col Bhalla was flown to Chennai by a special aircraft and then driven to Pondicherry in a car. He reached Pondicherry and the letter was read out to the Mother by Madhav Pandit on 1 December. Mother wrote Her blessings in the same letter to General Arora.

Col Bhalla took that letter and returned to Calcutta on the morning of the 3rd December. However, General Arora said that he had forgotten to write something in that letter - he was apprehensive about the international reaction, since we would be branded the aggressors if we attacked first. But most miraculously that very same evening, Pakistan attacked India on the western front with her planes and the war had started. India was thus saved the embarrassment of having to be called the aggressor.

The rest is history and is well known to the world. However, it might be pertinent to put in a comment made by the Mother after the ceasefire was announced on December 16.

This is what she said:

"Again, it won't be for this time.

It won't be done that way. I've seen how. It won't be done through battle: the different parts of Pakistan will demand separation. There are five of them. And by separating, they will join India – to form a sort of confederation. That's how it will be done."

We conclude this article by reproducing the letter written by Mrs Indira Gandhi to Mother after the war in December.

Letter received by Mother in December 1971 from Mrs Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India.

Revered Mother,

Through these critical months I have thought constantly of you. I can find no words with which to express my gratitude for your support. Your blessings are a great source of strength. Our difficulties are not over. The American administration is most upset that its calculations were so completely wrong, and they will use their power to try to humble us and specially to create division between Bangladesh and ourselves.

I think our nation has taken a step towards maturity. Yet there are many who look only to today. If India is to be great we must improve the quality of the minds of our people. I know that this is your desire. In my humble way, I am trying to do what I can.

With respectful regards,

Yours sincerely,

Indira Gandhi

Mother's reply:

To Indira

With blessings

India must be proud of your leadership.

Let the country take its true place in the world for showing the way towards the supreme Truth.

With love

Mother