

The BDR Mutiny: Mystery Remains but Democracy Emerges Stronger

Anand Kumar*

The mutiny in para-military force, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) took place only two months after the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh. This mutiny nearly upstaged the newly installed Shaikh Hasina government. In the aftermath of mutiny both the army and the civilian governments launched investigations to find the causes and motives behind the mutiny, however, what provoked mutiny still remains a mystery. This paper discusses the mutiny in the Bangladesh Rifles and argues that whatever may have been the reasons behind the mutiny it has only made democracy in Bangladesh emerge stronger. The mutiny also provides a lesson to the civilian government that it should seriously handle the phenomenon of Islamic extremism in the country if it wants to keep Bangladesh a democratic country.

Introduction

The democratically elected Shaikh Hasina government in Bangladesh faced its most serious threat to survival within two months of its coming to power because of mutiny in the para-military force, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). In the past, Bangladesh army has been involved in coup and counter-coup, resulting in prolonged periods of military rule. Though BDR has not been immune from mutiny, it was for the first time that a mutiny in this force raised the specter of revival of army rule. The mutiny was controlled by the prudent handling of the situation by the Shaikh Hasina government. In the aftermath of mutiny both the army and the civilian governments launched investigations to find the causes and motives behind the mutiny, however, what provoked mutiny still remains a mystery. BDR is the main force that guards international border of Bangladesh with India. The Bangladesh army is mostly used for international peacekeeping and for maintaining law and order in trouble prone areas like Chittagong Hill Tracts. Hence any development in BDR becomes important also from the Indian point of view.

This paper discusses the mutiny in the Bangladesh Rifles and argues that whatever may have been the reasons behind the mutiny it has only made democracy in Bangladesh emerge stronger. The mutiny also provides a lesson

* Dr. Anand Kumar is an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

to the civilian government that it should seriously handle the phenomenon of Islamic extremism in the country if it wants to keep Bangladesh a democratic country.

BDR: A Force with Chequered History

The Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) along with the Bangladesh army is one of the most important elements of state security architecture in Bangladesh. It has nearly 67,000 soldiers who are stationed across the country. This para-military force is first line of defence of Bangladesh. It is engaged in patrolling border, checking smuggling and cross-border crime and helps government in establishing its authority in remote areas. During wartime this force is expected to provide support to the army.

Though Bangladesh Rifles units can also be used to assist police in putting down domestic disturbances, their primary role is to guard the frontiers of Bangladesh. The force is organized into battalions along military lines. During war time or national emergencies, the president as commander in chief can authorize the military to assume direct control over all paramilitary and police forces.

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The origin of the Bangladesh Rifles is generally traced from formation of 'Ramgarh Local Battalion' in 1795. In subsequent years, this force took different names and uniforms in accordance with the demands of the time. In 1799, the force established the first camp in Pilkhana named as 'Special Reserve Company'. The East Pakistan Rifles, a force set up in undivided Pakistan was last in this series after which the force was renamed as Bangladesh Rifles in 1972 once Bangladesh became independent. BDR earned lot of glory during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. It suffered 817 casualties, and was honored with two posthumous gallantries, 'Bir Srestho', award for extraordinary chivalry.¹

Immediately after the independence of Bangladesh, BDR consisted of 9,000 soldiers who were mostly deserters from East Pakistan Rifles and had revolted against the Pakistani officers during the Liberation War. But when Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wanted to merge the Bangladesh Rifles with the national militia Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini, the BDR strongly opposed the move. That was the first occasion when the border force witnessed a mutiny like situation.²

By 1973 a vigorous recruiting campaign has swelled the Bangladesh Rifles ranks to about 20,000 personnel. Its current strength is around 67000. The

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In Bangladesh, BDR has been considered as a nationalistic force because it had revolted against the Pakistani army during the Liberation War. But it is also a fact that BDR soldiers carried out rebellions in 1972 and 1991. But due to limitation of BDR laws, those responsible for the mutinies could not be punished and thus those incidents failed to discourage BDR members from carrying out future revolts.³

The Course of the Mutiny

The mutiny in para-military BDR began on the second day of the annual BDR week celebrations. These celebrations had begun at Pilkhana in Dhaka on February 24, 2009 and the prime minister of Bangladesh Shaikh Hasina had addressed them on that day. During these celebrations around 150 BDR officers including its entire top brass were present at the headquarters for the celebrations. Besides, there were thousands of soldiers from different battalions. Overall, it is estimated that there were around 9000 people in the Pilkhana compound when the mutiny broke-out.⁴

In the initial stages of mutiny, it was suggested that the rebellion broke out after one of the BDR soldier was shot dead by an army officer as the soldier was asking his chief why the officer had not taken up their demands with the prime minister when she addressed the soldiers the day before on the occasion of the Rifles Week 2009. They also alleged that BDR director general, Major General Shakil Ahmed, had hurled abusive words at some of the soldiers, who had become unruly in the durbar. They were criticising the 'Dal Bhat' programme of the Bangladesh Rifles.⁵ As part of the 'Dal Bhat' programme BDR had opened outlets for selling essential commodities at fair prices.⁶ But later it was alleged that officers made huge amount of money by indulging in corruption.

However, very different versions started emerging after the mutiny ended and

investigations began. Reports indicated that a group of BDR members were getting organized over some longstanding demands of para-military force and they met several political figures before the national elections.⁷ They became restless after failing to get expected response from the political personalities. In this background they held a number of secret meetings at different places with the aim of taking up action regarding their demands. They also planned to hold army officers, including the director general of BDR, as hostages in the Darbar on February 25. To implement the plan they decided to loot the armoury and take control of different important installations including different entrances to the BDR headquarters.

In the final meeting held on the night of February, the rebels distributed responsibility among themselves. As per the plan, some rebels of Rifle battalions took control of various entrance gates of Pilkhana compound and by eight O'clock in the morning started looting the central armoury.

When the DG was delivering his address at the Darbar Hall in the morning on 25 February 2009 two rebels (sepoy Mainuddin and sepoy Kajal) suddenly got on the stage. Sepoy Mainuddin was carrying arms. He aimed his arms at the DG. At that time a blank shot was fired outside which was probably a signal to the rebels to start the mutiny. Following which other soldiers also started leaving the Darbar.

Afterwards, all communication means were used to instigate soldiers against the army officers throughout the country. BDR soldiers were being told that officers had shot dead a BDR member at the Darbar Hall which started indiscriminate firing in and around the Darbar Hall. About 40 army officers got stranded inside the Darbar Hall, others managed to flee. Most of those stranded in the hall were brutally killed.⁸

Most top officers of the BDR including its Director General, Major General Shakil Ahmed, died in a hail of bullets within ten minutes after the shooting began at the Pilkhana darbar. This was confirmed Lt Col Syed Kamruzzaman, who survived the killing-spree of border troops.⁹ Most of the army officers were killed by 11 am on February 25. Of the 57 army officers, 52 were killed in Darbar Hall and adjoining areas, 5 others were killed elsewhere inside the Pilkhana. Nine BDR members were killed during the mutiny. Most BDR soldiers probably died in cross fires when they obstructed mutineers. Besides an army soldier and four civilians were killed and about 30 others were injured.¹⁰

During the course of the mutiny three rounds of negotiations took place. In the first round, Shaikh Hasina, the prime minister of Bangladesh sent state minister for LGRD and co-operatives Jahangir Kabir Nanak and Jatiya Sangsad Whip Mirza Azam to BDR headquarters for negotiation. During this round it was noticed that there was no identifiable leadership among the revolting

soldiers, which delayed the negotiation process.¹¹ Still Babar and Nanak managed to take a 14-member BDR team to the Hasina's residence for negotiation. All this while, mutineers kept expressing their grievances on various television channels. They appeared newly recruited soldiers and were very young and unorganized.

Still unaware about the massacre, the prime minister offered "amnesty" to general soldiers on promise that the soldiers will accept a ceasefire, surrender weapons, and free the hostages. Though the amnesty was announced verbally without any formal or legal support, a clarification on behalf of the prime minister was soon circulated, excluding the active participants of the mutiny from this amnesty.

The Second round of negotiations also took place on the first day of the mutiny in the evening. In this round Lawmaker Fazle Noor Taposh accompanied Nanak to Rifles Square to talk with mutineers. Home Minister Sahara Khatun and Mirza Azam joined them.

The last round of negotiations took place on the second day of the mutiny at Ambala Inn between Agriculture Minister Motia Chowdhury and the BDR men. They demanded withdrawal of military and insisted on surrendering their weapons to Deputy Assistant Director (DAD) of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) Syed Towhidul Alam. In the afternoon the chief of armed forces of Bangladesh held another emergency meeting with the PM after which another group of political envoys went to BDR to give them one last chance to surrender. The political leaders warned the BDR men about the prime minister's intention to take the hardline. People living within three kilometer of BDR HQ were asked to vacate the area. Hasina in a televised speech appealed to the BDR men to lay down their guns immediately and warned them not to force her to take tough actions.

According to Lt Col Shams, it was the Hasina's speech that changed the situation. A group of soldiers began surrendering weapons following the speech. Sahara Khatun continued the talks with BDR men about the surrender and release of hostages. Soldiers freed the captive women and children along with the remaining army officers.

The mutiny had engulfed other parts of the country on the second day. There were reports of disobedience and general indiscipline in BDR outposts at Chittagong, Rangpur, Chapainawbganj, Satkhira and Jessore. But things subsided after mutiny came under control in Pilkhana.

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Theories Behind the BDR Mutiny

Several theories have been put forward to explain the BDR mutiny which took every one by surprise and almost destabilized the newly restored democracy. When the first news of the mutiny broke, the sentiment of people was clearly in favour of the mutineers, partly owing to their socio-economic background but mainly due to the stories of deprivation they managed to deliver to the public. Some people were seen gathering around the BDR gates and expressing their solidarity with the mutineers. Some even presented it as a "class revolt." The perceptions however dramatically changed after the mass graveyards were discovered. People were shocked with the brutality of the massacre. Media switched from "mutiny" to "carnage" in referring to the incident.¹²

Unfulfilled Demands Leading to Mutiny

In the initial phases of the mutiny it was thought that the mutiny was due to the unfulfilled longstanding demands of the BDR. The mentality of not accepting authority of the army had been dormant among the BDR members for long. They had been demanding appointment of their own officers under a system as the BCS cadre, increase of border allowance, 100 per cent ration allowance, sending them to the UN Mission, restructuring of their salary structure in a similar model as that of the army. Besides, discontent was also present in the force because of the Daal-bhat programme, punishment of sepoy, lack of transparency in running BDR shops, luxurious lifestyle of officials and corruption in running the schools. They circulated leaflets at different times with the aim of venting their discontent and realising their demands.¹³

It is however unlikely that the mutiny of this magnitude was carried out just because these long-standing demands were not fulfilled. Moreover, some of the former officers of BDR claimed that many steps were taken to improve the working condition in BDR and soldiers were better off under present dispensation than what they were during the days of East Pakistan Rifles.¹⁴ Some others also argued that it was difficult to justify the mutiny over corruption in Dal Bhat programme as most BDR soldiers and their lower level officers were themselves extremely corrupt and often hand in glove with the smugglers operating on international border.

Conspiracy Theories

As the full horrors of the Bangladesh Rifles mutiny began to unravel, several conspiracy theories started taking shape. The most important among them is the theory of destabilization attempt. Under this theory it was suggested that forces inimical to Awami League government were involved in inciting this mutiny. Through the mutiny they wanted to create a civil war kind of situation

by pitting army against the BDR. Bangladesh Premier Sheikh Hasina also subscribed to the view. During an Awami League meeting in Dhaka she said, "The aim of the conspirators, who had staged the bloody incidents at BDR headquarters killing scores of brilliant army officers, was to trigger anarchy and push the country to the brink of a civil war ... They (mutiny masterminds) still want to set off a civil war."¹⁵ She urged all to be alert so that the perpetrators could not commit similar crimes again in their bid to destroy the country's democracy, which was restored after the landmark polls following two years of state of emergency. Hasina also renewed her earlier pledge to bring the "killers and the conspirators" to justice, even if it required enacting new laws

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The cruelty shown during the BDR mutiny was only next to what was seen during the liberation war by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators. Hence many people suspected the involvement of Islamists in the whole incident. Most security analysts, including former chiefs and Generals in unison also declined to call the massacre inside BDR headquarters "a mere mutiny", putting their weight behind the growing fears about a conspiracy. It was suggested that a particular quarter chalked out the plan to kill all senior Army officers serving in the BDR as they gathered at the paramilitary force's headquarters to celebrate the annual BDR Week.¹⁶ Some survivors and security analysts said it was a "planned killing" aimed at "crippling" the army and BDR in a country that has just returned to democracy. Some survivors of the massacre like army doctor Lt. Col. Abdus Salam asserted that only a section of the rebel soldiers was involved in the massacre. The national probe report subsequently also suggested that only a core group of soldiers were aware of the plans to kill the officers whereas the rank and file thought that officers would only be held hostage to be used as a bargaining chip in the negotiations with government.¹⁷

The BDR chief, Shakil Ahmed was a man of secular credentials. He had promised to work closely with India in countering terrorist groups active along the borders. In the perception of the Border Security Force (BSF) officials of India he was a very friendly person always willing to cooperate. In the border meeting of BSF-BDR, on October 10, 2008 at the Dawki-Tambil border outpost in eastern Meghalaya BDR chief, Major General Shakil Ahmed admitted that HUJI was a threat to both Bangladesh and India.¹⁸ There was considerable improvement in BSF-BDR relations during his tenure. This may not have been to the liking of some in Bangladesh and even Pakistan.

The mutineers were looking for Col. Gulzar Uddin Ahmed, RAB official who

gave major setback to the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). They had shouted, "Where is that Gulzar?" Col Gulzar, during his two year service as Additional D.G of RAB (intelligence wing), played a significant role in raiding JMB dens and arresting JMB stalwarts from different places in the country. In fact, this also started a debate in Bangladesh and some people questioned the wisdom of transferring officers who served in sensitive posts to field level organisations immediately afterwards. One retired major general opined that in the interest of their personal safety and security they should be taken back in their parent organisation (army), enabling them to serve there for at least two years to avoid public exposure and vendetta.¹⁹

The mutineers not only fled with the looted weapons, they also destroyed a large number of classified documents of national security import. Similarly mutineers attempted to access information stored in BDR computers. This also made people suspect the role of outside hand in the BDR mutiny.²⁰

Besides the role of Islamists, involvement of Pakistan was also suspected. Soon after coming to power this time, the Awami League-led alliance had decided to prosecute war criminals responsible for killing and torturing thousands of people during the country's liberation war. To implement this pre-poll promise a unanimous resolution was passed in parliament for the proposed trial of mostly top Jamaat-e-Islami leaders and some from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This was followed by Hasina's vocal support for a South Asian anti-terror task force. Her government arrested Chittagong's leading arms dealer Hafizur Rehman and restarted the Chittagong arms seizure case in view of Rehman's confessions that the huge arsenal seized in the port city in April 2004 was meant for India's north-eastern rebel group, ULFA, and that several BNP and Jamaat leaders were involved. Many believe that these developments angered Pakistan and their local supporters.²¹

The objective of the mutiny once again was to upstage the Sheikh Hasina government. Just nine days before the BDR mutiny, Pakistan president Asif Ali Zardari had sent one of his emissaries — Zia Ispahani — to Dhaka to request Hasina not to open war criminal cases. This, expectedly, did not find much favour with the Bangladesh Prime Minister.²²

Ispahani apparently made it clear that any attempt to reopen the cases would adversely affect the relations between the two countries. He called on Begum Khaleda Zia a day after his meeting with Hasina and advised the BNP supremo to stay away from her cantonment residence on February 25 and 26, which she did. Top leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami Matiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid were also missing from their homes on both days.

It was also alleged that BNP leader-cum-shipping baron Salahuddin Qader Chowdhury alias Saka Chowdhury had played a key role in abetting the

mutineers by providing funds to the tune of several crores of taka.²³ It was also pointed out that a huge amount of funds and arms had come from outside well before the BDR jawans went berserk. Lt-Col Shams, a survivor of the massacre, described how he had seen arms being unloaded from a grey pick-up van while he was hiding inside the BDR headquarters. Several reports also indicated that many outsiders were present in Pilkhana during the massacre in BDR uniforms.

On the other hand, Islamist parties like Jamaat-e-Islami alleged that the BDR bloodbath was carried out from the 'intelligence headquarters' of India. During a party programme its chief Matiur Rahman Nizami asked, "How come the Indian media ran the news of the BDR carnage citing their intelligence sources before the local TV stations could cover it?" The Jamaat chief further alleged that the 'killing mission' was executed from the intelligence headquarters through 'close monitoring'. He said India pulled a masterstroke by destroying the border guards and trying to weaken the army, and national security and defence. "It needs to be seen whose interest could be behind the incident," Nizami added. He was also critical of the way the government handled the crisis and felt that the massacre "could have been averted without firing a single shot if the Artillery Brigade was given the responsibility."²⁴ He also felt that those who want to make Bangladesh a vassal state were behind the mayhem.²⁵ He demanded formation of a probe committee with representatives from the judiciary, defense, law enforcement agencies and all parties in parliament to unveil the mystery behind the BDR mutiny.²⁶

There seems to be little truth behind this allegation of Islamists. It is quite unlikely that India would try to destroy the only security presence on the border from the side of Bangladesh. In fact, it was widely feared during and after the mutiny that unmanned border would give smugglers, terrorists and other anti-social elements a free run. India would never like a chaotic border with Bangladesh which would ultimately work against its own interest. To say that Artillery Brigade would have quelled the mutiny in no time, is misjudging the situation. It could have only led to bloodbath as a large majority of BDR soldiers were leaderless and were getting panicked at every move of the army. They started firing outside Pilkhana when the army and RAB took positions. They fired at the helicopter when it flew over Pilkhana. Similarly, they also got panicky when the mobile network in the area went off.

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could have ultimately led to the ouster of Shaikh Hasina by the army. In fact, mutiny appeared to have partially succeeded in its objective by driving a wedge between the army and the civilian government. When Shaikh Hasina visited army headquarters to pacify the army officers she was hackled and even General Moeen offered twice to resign. It was only because of the Gen Moeen that the army was kept in control. The anger prevalent among the army officers was clearly manifested when the army decided to launch its own investigation though civilian government had promised a prompt enquiry and punishment of the guilty. Jamaat has always been a prominent centre of anti-India propaganda. The utterances of Nizami were part of that agenda and may be also a ploy to divert attention from the Islamist forces that were widely seen as the main culprits behind the whole episode.

Impact of the Mutiny on Bangladesh

Damage to BDR

The BDR mutiny was a major setback to this nearly two hundred year old institution. This mutiny destroyed the complete command structure of the para-military force and created instability in the security environment of Bangladesh and south Asia in general. For a poor country like Bangladesh it will not be an easy task to replace fifty nine well trained officers, including a large number of senior officers. It takes time to create a disciplined force and generate feeling of camaraderie among the members. Though the government has decided to disband BDR and create a new force in its place, taking this new force to a particular level of professionalism will prove to be a major long-term challenge for the Bangladeshi state.²⁷

Damage to State Security Architecture

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) is a major actor within the state security architecture of Bangladesh with 67,000 soldiers stationed across the country. The annihilation of this force is a major blow to the security structure of Bangladesh. The collapse of BDR may also compromise with the security situation on the international border of Bangladesh. It will be quite a while before a new force starts performing the same duties with the same level of professionalism.

The primary task of the BDR was to guard the international border of Bangladesh mostly with India and to a smaller extent with Myanmar. Naturally, the core objective of the BDR will be seriously compromised due to the mutiny in the BDR. A nearly dysfunctional BDR would not be able to check inbound or outbound infiltration through the Bangladesh border. It is possible that the unguarded border might be exploited by the Islamists or armed ethnic insurgent groups active in India's northeast for their cross-border movements.

This situation might also give a fillip to smuggling of illegal goods, narcotics and human trafficking. Bangladesh is considered to be a transit route for smuggling narcotics and small arms across the South Asia. Therefore, an unguarded border has serious consequences not only for Bangladesh, but also for the entire region.

The mutiny has also resulted in trust deficit between “Command” and “troops”, “Institutions” and “State.” There is also trust deficit between organizations. The mutiny also affected Civil Military Relations (CMR) which was improving under the leadership of General Moeen.

Proliferation of Small Arms

Towards the end of the mutiny a large number of BDR rebel soldiers escaped. They took along with themselves huge quantity of explosives (mostly hand grenades), ammunitions and weapons. Subsequently, the Pilkhana compound was looted by local criminal gangs who made off with left over weapons and explosives. It is feared that some of these weapons might also end up with Islamists and militant terror groups. That might create a serious security threat for Bangladesh and whole south Asia in general.

Sagging Morale of the Security Forces

The mutiny in Bangladesh has dampened the morale of all security forces in Bangladesh. Though only BDR will be disbanded and reorganized as a new force, the Bangladesh army has also lost a large number of its senior officers. Mutiny was the most gruesome incident after the atrocities committed by the Pakistani forces during the Liberation war. Probably, even during the Liberation War the Bangladesh army did not loose as many top officers as they did within hours after the break out of the mutiny.²⁸

Most people see failure of intelligence agencies as an important factor for this brutality to take place. A large section in Bangladesh believes that a mutiny of this magnitude can not be a spontaneous act and lot of planning must have gone into it before it finally took place. The mutineers had circulated leaflets night before the mutiny. As a result, the intelligence agencies of Bangladesh are facing severe criticism. In fact, the civilian government has taken a major step to reorganize intelligence agencies in Bangladesh.

Impact on Counter Terror Capacity of the State

Though BDR was not directly involved in counter-terror drives, it played a significant role by deterring the terror groups from entering Bangladesh, at least when it wanted. But as the BDR is now in a state of disarray, the terrorist groups might try to use this opportunity to strengthen themselves. Mutiny took

the toll of counter-terror experts like col. Gulzar Hossain. Before coming to BDR, Colonel Gulzar, was Director of Intelligence, RAB. He was a key person in combating Islamist militancy in Bangladesh who apprehended dozens of Islamist militants and their kingpins.

Safety of Classified BDR Documents

BDR is an important part of defence architecture of Bangladesh. During the course of the mutiny, rebels ransacked the Director Generals office. They destroyed many important documents and also attempted to glean information from the computer hard disks. It is possible that many sensitive information might have been compromised.

Militant Penetration in the Security Forces

A large section in Bangladesh believes that a mutiny of this magnitude can not be a spontaneous act and lot of planning must have gone into it before it finally took place.

The possible involvement of Islamists in the mutiny raises the fear of their penetration into the security forces. During the investigation process Commerce minister, Col Farukh Khan who was coordinating the investigations had expressed this possibility. This view however stirred a controversy in Bangladesh and many felt that it would damage the interest of Bangladesh army who are a major beneficiary of the UN peacekeeping operations. Hence, subsequently, an attempt was made to downplay the role of Islamists.

The national probe report on the BDR mutiny also could not clearly establish the causes behind the mutiny. The report said,

The real cause and motive behind the barbaric incident could not be established beyond doubt. The committee feels that further investigation is required to unearth the real cause behind the incident. The negative attitude among the general BDR members towards the army officers, and their discontent over unfulfilled demands may be identified as the primary cause of the mutiny. Analysis of these demands gives the impression that such small demands can not be the main cause of such a heinous incident. These points have been used to influence the general BDR soldiers. The main conspirators may have used these causes to instigate this incident, they themselves working from behind curtains to destabilise the nation.²⁹

Impact on Democracy

It is possible that the BDR mutiny was provoked to give a major setback to

democracy which was revived just two months ago after a prolong rule of the caretaker government. Hasina herself alleged that the mutiny was engendered with the objective of creating a civil war kind of situation in the country. Conspirators probably hoped that killing of army officers in such large numbers and in a brutal fashion will incite the army to clash with the BDR ignoring the civilian government's directives.

But here the democracy in Bangladesh was in for a pleasant surprise. No doubt, the army and its officers were greatly hurt by the brutal killings of the fellow army men but under the enlightened leadership of General Moeen army refused to cross the limit. Though in a video made public the army officers were seen talking angrily with Shaikh Hasina, but the army decided to abide by the decisions taken by the civilian government. In fact, in a never before example, the army chief General Moeen publicly stated that the army of Bangladesh was subservient to the civilian government.³⁰ This was major departure from the past. In countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh armed forces have been a major player. But this statement of Moeen gave a shot in the arm to democracy in Bangladesh.

Implications for India

Indo-Bangladesh border is known for its porosity. This border is crossed at will by smugglers, terrorists and other anti-social elements. The terrorist and militant groups operating in Bangladesh are known to have strong operational and ideological linkages to other terrorist groups in the South Asian region. This border is manned by BSF on Indian side whereas BDR mans Bangladesh side of the border. Though several proposals for joint patrolling were made by India, so far it had not fructified. However, some positive developments had taken place when BDR was led by Gen Shakil Ahmed. There was a perceptible change in relationship between BSF and BDR. The earlier acrimony seen at the biennial BSF-BDR meeting was gradually disappearing. Most importantly, Ahmed saw Islamist groups as a common threat for both the countries and wanted to face them together. Definitely, mutiny has given a setback to these positive developments. However, India has seen the mutiny in BDR as an entirely internal matter of that country.³¹ It also helped Bangladesh by keeping the border calm during that period³² and by not allowing fleeing BDR rebels to cross over into Indian territory. This Indian approach has been duly appreciated by that country.

Conclusion

There is no doubt, that the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) was a nationalist force at the time of independence of Bangladesh. But subsequently degeneration had set in the force. The soldiers of BDR had revolted twice before the mutiny in February 2009. On those occasions they escaped lightly as they were

prosecuted under the BDR law. The rot in BDR worsened in later years. The institution was completely contaminated under the rule of four party alliance. Jamaat-e-Islami tried to intensify the Islamisation of Bangladesh security forces. Under this programme, a large number of people from Islamist background were recruited in both Bangladesh army and the BDR. The commerce minister Col. Farukh Khan who was coordinating the investigations revealed this in the initial stages of enquiry. Subsequently, he had to retract his words as some quarters raised hue and cry over the possible implication of such disclosures. But if Bangladesh is interested in strengthening democracy and boosting control of civilian government over the military it will have to take actions check the growth of anti-democratic forces. It will have to take steps to stop such forces from penetrating state institutions specially its security forces. This time, the civilian government in Bangladesh is trying to draw right lessons from the history. It has rightly taken the decision to disband BDR whose image will now always be tarnished by this bloody mutiny. The government initially wanted to try the rebels under the military law to deter them from taking such steps in future, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has advised the government against it. Still the government would be trying the rebels under fast track tribunals, which will ensure that the guilty are punished in a short period. This step will also pacify the Bangladesh army which suffered maximum damage from this mutiny. It is possible that some outside forces tried to incite army but the whole episode seems to have finally only strengthened the democracy of Bangladesh.



Notes:

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