

“An Internal Matter”:
The United States, Grassroots Activism
and the Creation of Bangladesh

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[Chapter 1 excerpt about Mary Frances Dunham]

I. Introduction

In May of 1971, Mary Frances Dunham sat down at her home on New York's Upper East Side to write a letter to the First Lady of the United States. Her reason for writing, she explained, was the ongoing crisis in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) where, for the past two months, the forces of Pakistan's military government had been attempting to suppress a widely supported movement for Bengali self-determination. Advising Mrs. Nixon that American support for Pakistan was fuelling the suffering of millions, Mary Frances wrote:

Like funerals, the recent disasters in East Pakistan (the cyclone and revolution) have brought together Americans who once lived and worked there. We are deeply concerned that our country not repeat past mistakes and that we act more wisely and more firmly than we have in the past in view of the present tragedy.

Widely scattered geographically, informally silenced by organizations for whom we work, it has been especially difficult to make ourselves heard. Yet we have insights and information which only persons who have lived for some length of time in Bengal can have. We are educated and intelligent Americans, former employees of the U.S. Government, of international agencies, of a wide variety of missions, private foundations and companies – professors, doctors, specialists.

We who have lived there have witnessed the chronic misunderstanding between the West and East Pakistanis and the oversimplified aid pattern from America which only encouraged an economic rift between them. We were not heeded in Pakistan, and we desperately want to be heeded now. The lives of many million[s] [of] people and one of the world's richest cultures hang in the balance.¹

For Mary Frances, who along with her family had lived in Dhaka during from 1960-67, the tragic conflict in East Pakistan was anything but remote. It cut to the core of America's role in the world. Singling out the role of continued U.S. economic and military assistance to Pakistan

and the dangers of short-term political thinking, she impressed upon Mrs. Nixon the importance of allowing Americans with an intimate knowledge of East Pakistan and its people to be heard. “Without wisdom,” she warned, “[American] generosity will be misused again.”²

Around the same time, on the other side of the country in Glendale, California, a group of Bengali students and professionals, the American League of Bangladesh (A.L.B.), issued a missive to local newspapers, also calling for the U.S. to rethink its support for Pakistan:

The struggle that is now going on in Bangladesh is part of the general world-wide movement for liberation from colonial domination. It is no different from the struggle that the American people waged against their distant rulers two centuries ago. Like the British colonies in America, East Pakistan is being bled white in the interests of alien rulers a thousand miles away. Like you, we are having to pay taxes to a distant government indifferent to our welfare, without any right of representation. Like you, we have decided to exercise our right of self-determination. Like you, we will prevail, no matter the cost.

Knowing the great traditions of the American people, the people of Bangladesh have no doubt that the American government and people will do their best to arrest the monstrous genocide in Bangladesh. Time, however, is of essence. If innocent human beings have to be saved, the time for action is now. In the name of humanity, we appeal to you to use your influence as a world power to stop the indiscriminate killing of thousands of innocent civilians.³

Two pleas – one to perhaps the most powerful woman in the country, the other to the American people at large. United in their concern for a conflict that drew little notice from most Americans, the words of Mary Frances Dunham and the A.L.B. offer a glimpse into the grassroots response and activism that East Pakistan crisis provoked in the U.S.A.

While some activists fought to help create Bangladesh, a new country that would be free from what they saw as decades of Pakistani tyranny, others were more concerned with the

damage that U.S. support for Pakistan would do to America's reputation abroad and for the stability of South Asia. Yet the stories of such activists, the many Bengalis and Americans who spoke out for Bangladesh and against U.S. policy in 1971, remain relatively hidden in existing histories of the war.

What bound all activists who mobilised in America during the Bangladesh crisis was a deep sense that the crisis occurring thousands of miles away in East Pakistan was layered in injustices. The injustice of the democratic aspirations and rights of a people being stifled by a military dictatorship, the injustice of seeing their friends and families driven from their homes by military force, and the injustice that moved the Nixon administration (and numerous other governments) to treat such acts of violence and genocide as "an internal matter" for Pakistan.⁴ For these activists, the East Pakistan crisis was not some small feature of internal Pakistani politics, but was, rather, a matter for all humankind and something which compelled those who opposed militarism and genocide to speak out.

Histories of the global response to the Bangladesh's Liberation War have tended to focus overwhelmingly on the realm of formal diplomacy, Cold War calculations, and elite political actors. Historians have identified how America, the Soviet Union, the U.K., India and China, amongst others, gauged the geopolitical ramifications of the conflict and took sides to further their respective interests.⁵ In an American context, such works explore the diplomatic machinations surrounding the conflict, describing how Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger encouraged their Pakistani allies to continue fighting the Bengalis while using Pakistan as a conduit for diplomatic talks with China.⁶ These studies draw on a rich literature outlining the tempestuous relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan from the 1950s onwards, an alliance