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The 1970 Bhola cyclone, nationalist politics and the subsistence crisis contract in Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The Bhola cyclone, one of the deadliest tropical cyclones the world has ever recorded, struck the Bay of Bengal in what was then the eastern wing of Pakistan in November 1970. At least a quarter and possibly up to half a million East Pakistanis perished, and livelihoods and landscape were decimated. The response by the Pakistan military government was widely deemed inadequate. The cyclone struck three weeks before the first democratic elections in the country, and campaigning on the back of the callousness of the ruling Pakistani elite, the Awami League won a landslide victory in its home province of East Pakistan, which should have placed their leader Sheikh Mujib in power. But the Pakistani elite had no intention of allowing this, forcing the Awami League into a declaration of independence. Pakistan responded with a vicious attack of genocidal intensity and intent, and within nine months, after a guerrilla war and an Indian intervention, Bangladesh was born.[1]

The Bhola cyclone is generally credited with having unleashed the series of events that gave birth to Bangladesh, but the politics of the event have rarely been examined in their time and place or for their wider implications, whether in the history of Bangladesh or in relation to the politics of disaster elsewhere. Bangladesh may have once been known as 'the basket case of the world', but it is now recognised for its exposure to the effects of climate change and its surprisingly successful management of the disasters that entails (B. Sen, Mujeri, and Shahabuddin 2007). It is still the most densely-populated largely agrarian country in the world, and has never had natural resources to match its vast human population, the eighth largest in the world. Yet despite these challenges, it has lifted over half its population out of poverty, and is considered a development success for advancing human development faster than its modest but steady economic growth would predict (Chowdhury et al. 2013; Lewis 2011; Van Schendel 2009; Asadullah, Savoia, and Mahmud 2014). Based on an extensive search and review of the scholarly literature as well as of the mass media (print newspaper and television) coverage of the event that is available online and in published form, this paper argues that the emergence of a social contract to protect against crises of subsistence and survival, triggered by the politically perfect timing of the Bhola cyclone, provided the foundations of those advances. For this reason, the politics of the Bhola cyclone merit closer inspection.

The nationalist politics of the Bhola cyclone help to explain why and how the country once termed 'the basket case' adapted relatively successfully to the worst effects of exposure to natural disasters, and in particular to the subsistence crises these episodically unleashed on an impoverished population. That adaptation depended on a transformation of political and social relations so that the power of its ruling elite came to depend substantially on its willingness and capacity to protect the population from common disasters, and from the subsistence shocks that regularly followed. That transformation came about through the emergence of a 'subsistence crisis contract', a variant of the anti-famine social contract (de Waal 1996) fitted to the specific political-ecological setting of the Bengal Delta. The terms of this contract were initially set out in the successful politicisation of the cyclone in the run-up to Pakistan's first real democratic elections in 1970. Tragically, the terms of the contract were only consolidated after a major famine followed another disaster in 1974, this time excess flooding. The moment of consolidation was one of multiple interlocking crises: the new

country was reeling from the aftermath of its traumatic civil war of 1971, facing the 1973-4 global commodity price shock and an unfriendly international aid regime willing to sacrifice starving Bangladeshis over Cold War politics (Sobhan 1979). The painful political crisis that ensued eventually locked the new political elite class, the impoverished masses and their international aid donors in a tacit agreement to protect against the worst effects of disasters. In the breathing space created by the declining frequency of major catastrophes since the 1980s, the foundations for the economic and social development were laid. On these foundations were built a national project for growth and human development that built on the lessons of the cyclone, the war, and the famine, focusing attention on the rural poor and on minimising the human effects of natural disasters and global economic crises.

2. Conceptualizing the political effects of disasters: a social contract against crises of subsistence and survival

Analysis of the political effects of the Bhola cyclone has been surprisingly cursory given its vast scale and significance in triggering a regional conflict at the height of the Cold War.[2] But in addition to the need to fill a general gap in the narrative history of this event, there are specific intellectual motivations for examining the political effects of the Bhola cyclone, which cohere in the idea of a subsistence crisis contract. First, from within development studies, understanding the political aftermath of disasters may help explain subsequent development policy choices and priorities. Bhola appears to have influenced Bangladesh's later achievements on disaster management and food security, drawing the attention of the state and the international community to the particular vulnerabilities of the region, and embedding a political mandate to protect against disasters in the originating rationale of the Bangladeshi state (Hossain 2017). As the effects of climate change accumulate and proliferate beyond the Bengal Delta, the story of the Bhola cyclone may offer pointers towards successful development pathways in other, similarly populous and precarious societies.

A second motivation is a desire to add empirical and historical flesh to 'social contract' theories of public action to address disastrous crises of subsistence and survival. There are two relevant, related applications of social contract thinking from within scholarship of famine and the politics of disaster. The first is the concept of the 'anti-famine contract' set out (and critiqued) by de Waal (1996); that concept is an articulation of Amartya Sen's well-known assertion that famines do not occur in democratic countries with a free press (A. Sen 2001, 16; see Rubin 2009 for the background and source to this famous but unwritten theory). The general idea is that in a responsive democratic system with a free mass media, famine creates an intolerable political scandal that forces public authorities to institutionalise famine-prevention activities.[3] De Waal notes that for Sen, the paradigmatic case of an anti-famine social contract is post-colonial India, where unlike other social ills, famine came to be a political scandal because of its political history:

> the Indian nationalist movement chose famine as an issue with which to discredit the British imperial government [and so] the legitimacy of the post-colonial government depends on preventing it. Famine prevention is intimately bound up with the entire ideology of Indian nationalism (A. de Waal 1996, 197).

The historically-specific struggle for political rights (de Waal 1996) Sen refers to in this general idea of a social contract against famine has special resonance in the history of the struggle for political rights in Bangladesh, because it was in East Bengal that the final Raj-era famine took place. The idea of a social contract has also been used to conceptualize adaptations by societies and polities to the effects of climate change, including the recognition that disasters often strike 'politically peripheral'

regions, and can lead to 'tipping points' in the relationship between state and society, and thereby to renegotiation of the social contract (Pelling and Dill 2006; Pelling and Dill 2010). One of the 'tipping points' Pelling uses to illustrate the value of a social contract approach to understanding socio-political adaptation to climate is that of the Bhola cyclone of 1970 (in particular, Pelling 2011). A social contract framing adds value because it directs attention to the historically-specific political struggles through which public action to tackle crises of subsistence and survival comes to be institutionalised, tested and renegotiated over time.

The third motivation for a political analysis of Bhola derives from the insights of political ecology and ecological perspectives on political history. In South Asian political history, the environment has typically been treated as 'a fixed ecological bow from which the arrows of all kinds of history take flight' (Iqbal 2010, 6). Examined closely and in context, the events of 1970 in East Pakistan, the wing separated from West Pakistan by India, cultural and linguistic difference, and economic division, showed how deeply ecology was imprinted on the politics of the Bay of Bengal. Few political histories of Bangladeshi nationalism fail to draw a straight line between the disaster and the Awami League election landslide that unleashed the struggle for independence only weeks later. It was, as a study for USAID noted, a 'critical juncture':

> *[The Bhola cyclone] was one of the first instances of a compound or iterative disaster where a natural event (the 1970 cyclone) helped trigger a civil war, which triggered an external military intervention and the final dissolution of a nation-state into two nation-states (USAID 2007, 42).*

Despite the critical political timing and presumed causal relation between Bhola and the liberation struggle that followed, the event has received close meteorological and epidemiological analysis but little more than a passing mention in the elite-centred nationalist political histories of Bangladesh (Ahmed 2013). Styled as an environmental shock whose effects crossed over into the political system, the conventional treatment of Bhola suggests a natural event that intruded upon a landscape otherwise unmarked by politics - or at least whose political meaning was exhausted by struggles over which human group should control the land and its resources. We are now accustomed to thinking of 'natural disasters' as political and politicised, but it is less common to think about whether and how disasters may be constitutive of politics (Pelling 2011). Pelling suggests the neglect of Bhola in the political analyses of Bangladesh's independence may reflect

> *the relative newness of treating environment crises as political significant events, combined with an academic avoidance of anything that could be perceived or misunderstood as environmental determinism (2011, 147).*

With these several motivations in mind, the aim of this paper is to analyse Bhola not as an unpredictable natural event that intruded upon a political situation, but rather as a set of circumstances in which politics and ecology were deeply entwined to create acute human vulnerability to life- and subsistence-threatening disasters. At the risk of a teleological explanation of the priorities gradually taken on by successive Bangladeshi regimes, it notes that the political significance of Bhola was not merely the coincidence of its remarkable timing. This 'perfect storm' crowned a series of natural disasters which made ever plainer the detachment and ineptitude of the Pakistani state and ever clearer the need for an alternative political dispensation - one that had the interests of its precarious peasantry at least in view. The disaster had political ramifications for the nation-state to be, not solely for its victims:

> *Although the brunt of the 1970 cyclonic disaster was faced by southern districts and the offshore islands of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), its socio-psychological impact fell on the entire incipient Bengali nation (Khondker 1995, 176).*

There was a fury in the recognition that the Pakistani leadership did not care about the victims of the crisis, and that they never would; once that genie was out of the bottle, there was no putting it back. But why did this turn out to be the perfect storm? How did it become the stuff of political mandate? Given that '[t]he way that a nation is born conditions much of its later political development' (Maniruzzaman 1988, 1) – what were its political effects?

3. The perfect storm

Bhola is still counted among the world's deadliest disasters, even including the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004. The storm struck in the Bay-facing south, where the waters from the Himalayas reach the ocean and where cyclones always strike, in the early hours of 12th November 1970. It was forecast to be of moderate intensity, and radio messages only started to warn of danger late in the afternoon (not that anyone trusted the messages in those days). Travelling at 150 mph at high tide it generated a 20 foot tidal wave that swept at least a quarter of a million people and very likely twice as many, with their animals, crops and houses into the Bay of Bengal.[4] One man interviewed for *The New York Times* told of how he and his wife watched helplessly as one by one each of their five children was torn from the trees they clung to by a howling frenzy of water and wind and flying debris. Almost half the population were washed away in one area. People spoke of the wave as like a bombing raid - presciently, it turned out, with the Pakistani army raids only four months into the future (Schanberg 1970).

Severe though it was, the Bhola cyclone was no freak occurrence. The coast around the Bay of Bengal is highly exposed to tropical storms and tidal surges (Frank and Husain 1971, 438). An estimated 42 per cent of deaths from tropical cyclones in the past two centuries have been from the south of the region now called Bangladesh (in Paul 2009). Historical records suggest severe cyclones occurred on average twice or less frequently per decade from the 1790s to the 1900s, at which time, the average rose to around three per decade. The 1960s were a decade of unusually intense cyclonic activity, with ten major events (see Table 1) (Frank and Husain 1971 citing Husain 1966).

TABLE 1 HERE

The World Bank estimated that of the 4.8 million people in the area affected by the cyclone, two million lived in the most damaged areas; a million acres of crop were destroyed and a further million damaged (World Bank 1970). Some 280,000 cattle and half a million poultry were lost, up to 400,000 houses and 3,500 schools damaged, and 9,000 sea and 90,000 river boats – 65 per cent of total fishing capacity - were destroyed (Frank and Husain 1971). Four months later, in February-March 1971, a survey found 600,000 people still lacked adequate shelter, and although people in the areas hit by the cyclone had better health and nutritional status than control groups (presumably because of external assistance), one million people still depended on relief (Sommer and Mosley 1972). One study found that over the longer-term, people who were already living in poverty or who lacked education were made worse off by the series of disasters of the early 1970s (including the war and the 1974 famine) (Eskander and Barbier 2014). For everyone else, the cyclone was a disaster on top of a series of similar disasters, in a context of under-development and official neglect.

4. The politics of disaster management

The Government of Pakistan knew coastal East Bengal was buffeted by cyclones and tidal bores, and had taken some preventive action (Reilly 2009). But disasters of this kind were accepted as part of the landscape: protecting these peasants and fisherfolk on the far southeastern fringes of its divided

territory was plainly unimportant to how the Pakistani regime read its mandate. It was days before news of the catastrophe reached Dacca (now Dhaka), let alone the capital Islamabad so much further away. Journalist Sydney Schanberg described the view of the Pakistani government:

> *Because natural disasters are so common and so difficult to control in East Pakistan, and because resources are so limited, the central Government pleading helplessness, has tended to ignore the disasters and invest its resources elsewhere (1970).*

There was little to impede the cyclone on its way to its victims. Many of these islands were too new to even have the protection afforded by mature trees, and the Sundarban forest that once covered the coastline had been cleared over the past century, partly thanks to colonial policies.[5] The Government of Pakistan had established a programme to develop cyclone protection, warning, shelter systems, deliver relief and reduce vulnerability by re-zoning settlement after the North Indian Ocean cyclone season of 1960. But the impacts of these efforts proved sadly limited. Warning systems depended on advanced technology, without sensitivity to whether and how people received these warnings (Frank and Husain 1971). Cyclone shelters built after 1960 were few, distant from the coasts and islands where the most vulnerable lived, and unsuited to people's needs.[6] A study of conditions only weeks before the Bhola cyclone found the most vulnerable lacked access to radios, could not hear cyclone warnings in time or mistrusted warnings, and were reluctant or physically unable to leave their homes and crops to possible theft in order to reach the small number of appropriate shelters (Islam 1971). Possibly as much as 90 per cent of the population got the message, but only 1 per cent fled to stronger buildings, because they could or would not go (Frank and Husain 1971).

5. 'Our dead have voted with their lives': the impacts on Pakistani political legitimacy

Outrage after a callous response to the disaster

Bhola was the end of any moral claims to Pakistani rule, and it dramatized the arguments for autonomy, if not outright independence, better than any campaign or manifesto message. Protecting the population against outright annihilation became the mandate for the state par excellence: independence for East Bengal could now be pitted as a matter of barest survival. The cyclonic sixties had already put disaster management on the national political agenda. Among its commitments to the peasantry, Sheikh Mujib's Awami League manifesto prominently featured commitment to flood relief, while the National Awami Party (Bhashani wing, or NAP (B)) campaigned on protection against natural disasters, declaring that September that

> *if concrete steps were not taken to correct interregional inequities and to protect Bengal against the destructive vagaries of nature, East Pakistan would be forced to separate from the western wing and develop friendly relations with whomever it wanted (Sisson and Rose 1990, 30).*

Indeed, the first direct democratic elections in Pakistan's history had originally been scheduled for July, only to be postponed to December 7 because of excess flooding in the East. Thus the cyclone struck Bhola only three weeks before the much-anticipated election. It was thus perfectly timed to politicise the Pakistani regime's lackadaisical relief effort.

Whether deliberately callous or not, the Pakistani government's cyclone relief effort was slow and careless of appearances. After getting off to a sluggish start, there was an effort to imply that Bengali

political leaders were crying wolf and overstating the devastation. The international community shouldered the burden of supplying and distributing relief from the outset and were 'more responsive than the central government of Pakistan', compounding the outrage:

> *Iran declared a day of mourning; Pakistan did not. Of more than two hundred relief planes that landed at Dhaka airport from nearly half the countries of the world, only one was from Pakistan (Khondker 1995, 180).*

Although slow to act and reliant on external aid, the Pakistani authorities retained control of the situation, keeping political considerations paramount: Indian offers to lend aircraft to help with relief were declined. Two recent analyses of the birth of Bangladesh linger on the details of Yahya's callousness: Raghavan (2013) depicts the architect of Pakistan's return to democracy surveying the cyclone damage from the air, returning from a successful trip to China (which he did not cut short), nursing a hangover with a few beers, pronouncing that it did not look so bad after all; Bass (2013) has him touring with a gold-topped cane. After a week in which no assessment of damage or declaration of national disaster was made, under growing external and domestic pressure, Yahya publicly apologised for the slow start and made assurances that all steps would be taken. For the citizens of its eastern wing, it was too little and too late. In the end, the recovery was moderately successful (Sommer and Mosley 1973), but possibly because people had adapted to their exposure, developing strong coping mechanisms after a decade (at the least) of major cyclone disasters (see (Alam and Collins 2010)).

The impact on the Pakistani democratic elections of 1970

This display of unconcern by the Pakistani elite took place only three weeks before an election scheduled to return Pakistan to democracy after an almost unbroken history of military rule. This was a, if not the, major mass electoral event, and the ruling elite had fielded candidates (Baxter 1971). The political imbecility and grotesque bad timing of the cyclone response all but defies explanation. Were the Pakistani authorities truly unable to guess that a few hundred thousand East Pakistanis washed out to sea might cause ructions? That their survivors might have a grievance against a state that failed to get its boots muddy? Apparently this was beyond their imagination.

A powerful editorial in *Forum*, a left-leaning magazine from East Pakistan, summarised the political lessons of Bhola:

> *A people's government would have had its chief executive with his cabinet sitting in Bhola … personally directing relief operations… The demand for popular government is thus no casual whim of ambitious politicians. It is an imperative for the survival of 70 million people. We have no illusions that elections are the end to our problems. They will merely record before our people and before the world the basic urge of the people of East Pakistan to rule themselves. It is a demand which on (sic) longer needs elaboration or justification. It now only has to be registered loud and clear. If this demand once made is ignored by our ruling classes, the next stage in the struggle for democracy will unveil itself. There is still time for statemanship which preserves this nation in peace and amity. But this can only be demonstrated if the people of East Pakistan speak with a clear voice. Our dead have voted with their lives: Let the living speak with their votes (reproduced in S. Ghosh 1990, 190).*

As wave follows storm, three weeks after this display of unfeeling, the first properly democratic elections produced a landslide for Sheikh Mujib's Awami League: they won 160 of the 162 National Assembly seats allotted to East Pakistan, with around 72 per cent of the vote, and 288 out of the 300 East Pakistan provincial assembly seats, in 'possibly the greatest victory of any party in a free and contested election anywhere' (Baxter 1971, 212). The cyclone put the shine on what gross political and economic disparity between the East and West wings of Pakistan meant was always going to be

a victory, making it sharper and more pregnant with possibility, ensuring the Awami League's 'six point' demand for regional autonomy under a federal system was not only a serious contender, but the only real game in town.

The political champion of the Bhola cyclone victims turned out to be the fascinating figure of Maulana Bhashani, the 'friend of the peasants', Sufi *pir* or saint, Islamic preacher and theorist, and leftist firebrand leader of NAP (B) an offshoot of the early Awami League.[7] Bhashani was by this time 85, with 70 years' of organising peasants and the disenfranchised under his belt, credited with having led the recent movement that forced General Ayub Khan to resign. Bhashani's messages of Islamic equality and non-communalism in the struggle against oppression and the risks of peasant life no longer resonate so well in national political discourse, but at the time they were, like Bhashani's public meetings, electric. They spoke to what many people who subsisted precariously together in this delta feared and needed.[8]

The Red Maulana was the first political leader to arrive on the scene of the cyclone. Hearing the news on the radio (or reading it in the newspaper, depending on legend) by his sickbed, he famously sprang up and made the gruelling journey to the cyclone areas. In his thesis, Abid Bahar paints a moving picture of Bhashani touring the area with great assiduousness and sadness. At Friday prayers in southern Noakhali, he preached that without serving humanity, the worship of God could never be complete: people should prepare for *jihad* or a struggle against injustice. He later told the press the people told him: '*Ora keu ashe ni*' – 'none of them came'. He returned to stage a huge event at Paltan in Dhaka where he notoriously declared 'Assalam Alleikum' to Pakistan – an ironic dismissal, which he followed up with the call, 'Independent East Pakistan Zindabad!', declaring intentions for independence.[9] Finally, he and NAP (B) withdrew from the elections, apparently from a combination of respect for the victims and an unwillingness to legitimise the election.[10]

In November 1970, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was riding a wave of popularity after his recent release from jail; he followed Bhashani three days later with an angry speech about the failings of Pakistan. When asked if this now meant independence he promised: 'not yet'. Historian David Ludden has pointed out that Mujib made the crucial point that the cyclone failure was a failure of the Pakistani state, not just of the Yahya regime (Ludden 2011). This could be interpreted to mean: in this political dispensation the state was structurally and functionally incapable of taking an interest in what happened to these people on its far southeastern fringes. To stay with Pakistan would be to face the storm, without the protection or relief of a state that had your back. After Bhashani's exit, the Awami League inherited the mandate to protect the masses of the peasants against such crises – both the effects of Bhashani's politicisation of the cyclone, and possibly some of his support.[11] These factors helped turn what would anyway have been a victory for the increasingly popular Mujib into a show-stopping landslide.

6. Seeing Bangladesh

It was not only at home that the political vibrations of the cyclone were felt. For the first time, the world could see this backwater of oddly-shaped Pakistan. These people had gone ignored in their distress before, notably during the famine of 1943, when the British colonial rulers starved East Bengal to keep rice out of Burmese/ Japanese hands, even while worrying about the effects on British morale of having to eat powdered eggs (Mukerjee 2010). Churchill's callousness in 1943 more

than matched Yahya's in 1970. Any lingering legitimacy the Raj may have enjoyed in East Bengal did not last the famine; Pakistani rule enjoyed a similar fate.

Unlike in 1943, in 1970 the world came to help, and saw (what soon became) Bangladesh. The place appeared worryingly perilous and poor, already a candidate for aid dependency. In their political assessment of the new nation in 1972, a CIA report commented insightfully on

> the uniqueness of an independent country suddenly facing problems of population and poverty on the scale involved here – a matter previously obscured by the area's incorporation into a larger entity (CIA 1972, 1).

A Thames Television news film[12] from the time offers insights into how these events were viewed externally. It starts with the return journey of three survivors, a young husband and wife and a younger girl who together survived days clinging onto jetsam. They are scarred, and the devastation of their community is plain as they returned home to great but subdued joy. These images of people trying to subsist on these fringes of land inspire wonder that anyone can survive the odds of life in the Bay of Bengal. The story then turns to a group of British army engineers, arrived to help with the relief effort. This group complains – they have been sitting for two days and can't deliver the relief (which they have, and the boats with which to transport it) because the Pakistani officer has not yet arrived. They have been told it is a great emergency but see no signs of great desperation. The film hands over to the Pakistani officer, finally shown up, whom the voiceover unaccountably describes as 'sympathetic' to the cyclone victims. With his sunglasses, pale sharp features, and distinct accent, the Pakistani officer seems as alien to the farmers and fisherfolk of the south as the beefy British engineers. His breezy demeanour displays no great sense of urgency, reflecting the attitude of General Yahya, his boss. The viewer is left with no great confidence in the future of these folk.

The international NGO Medicins Sans Frontiere dates its founding to the work of volunteer doctors at Bhola, which was a major event for humanitarians worldwide. But more importantly for understanding how natural disasters shaped Bangladesh's development trajectory, some of its large renowned non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also trace their roots to 1970. F. H. Abed was an oil company executive based in the southern city of Chittagong at the time. He loaded up a boat with supplies and went out to see how he could help. The experience was 'life changing in a way', he told an oral historian:

> The scene was just horrendous—bodies strewn everywhere—humans, animals, everything. That shocked me to an extent that I felt that the kind of life I led hardly had any meaning in a kind of context in which these people lived—the fragility of life of poor people.

Abed went on to found BRAC, the corporate organisation that now includes a major international NGO, a bank, manufacturing, food processing and retail businesses, and a university. Micro-credit is now criticised for creating indebtedness and new rural dependencies (J. Ghosh 2013), but the small loans distributed by organizations like BRAC and the Nobel Prize-winning Grameen Bank helped reduce people's vulnerabilities to crisis. NGOs are also credited with supporting Bangladesh's development with a range of pioneering social services, often in partnership with Government, including disaster relief, and can reasonably be said to have helped address 'the fragility of life of poor people'.

7. Conclusions: the subsistence crisis mandate of the Bangladeshi state

Bangladesh won its liberation through a hard fought war in 1971, but its vulnerability to humanitarian crises did not abate in the immediate aftermath of that violent conflict. However, with a nationalist government at the helm, the attitude and responsiveness of the public authorities to such disasters was transformed. Bhola created a firm connection between disaster management and national politics, an expectation that the state would or should intervene to protect people against crises of subsistence and survival. After 1970, investment in preventive infrastructure such as embankments, technically superior and credible early warning systems, networks of somewhat more user-friendly cyclone shelters and evacuation routes, and in safe water and food supply and other relief systems (Alam and Dominey-Howes 2015). Crucially, and starting immediately after independence, there has been a strong and sustained emphasis on building the administrative and human capacities to prepare and respond speedily and effectively when disasters strike. On coming to power in 1972, one of the early actions of Sheikh Mujib was to approve the establishment of the national Cyclone Preparedness Programme, one of the longest-running initiatives of its kind, involving state, donors, and community in awareness-raising, infrastructural development and disaster mitigation activities.[13] The results of these efforts started to show. The more severe cyclone Gorky in 1991 killed a still tragically vast 143,000 people, but cyclone preparedness had improved in the intervening 21 years, and many lives were probably saved. Great improvements were made in flood disaster management after the 1988 flood, seen in the successful management of those in 1998 (B. Sen, Mujeri, and Shahabuddin 2007). In 2007, Cyclone Sidr was as severe in magnitude as the Bhola storm, but the death rate was one-hundredth that in 1970.[14] Around half a million people evacuated the area hit by Cyclone Aila in 2009, but fewer than 200 people died in that disaster.

The Government of Bangladesh did not get to Sidr-levels of competence in cyclone preparedness overnight but through a long process of trial and error. This process of socio-political adaptation, as Pelling and Dill (2010) put it, has involved the political matter of growing recognition of the vulnerabilities of the population as well as technical understanding of how to address such crises; this process, the international community has played a part, as has Bangladeshi society, not least in the form of its community action on cyclone preparedness and NGO action on poverty and vulnerability. The challenge of preventing crises of subsistence and survival has been helped by relatively strong economic growth over the past quarter century (B. Sen, Mujeri, and Shahabuddin 2007), but made more challenging by population growth as people push ever further south, land frontiers having been long ago reached in ecologically safer areas. By 2050, if population growth remains steady and sea-level temperatures rise by 2° (an average scenario) an estimated 11 million people will be exposed to surge flooding (cyclones) in the southern region.[15] But the key contrast with the Pakistan era is that successive Governments of Bangladesh have recognised that regime survival – or legitimacy – depends on robust effort to protect people against such crises:

> The political fortune of Bangladesh has always been closely linked with the vicissitudes of nature - a relationship that has been manifest since the November cyclone of 1970. (Khondker 1992, 17–18).

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The lessons of disaster response and management were not learned overnight. The absence of administrative machinery to prevent disasters and the lack of information systems were signal failures of the state that made their deadly reappearance under Bangladeshi rule when the 1974 famine struck after excess flooding hit a population already weakened by poverty and war. That tragic humanitarian disaster, as well as its tragic political aftermath in which the nationalist hero Sheikh Mujib and his family were brutally assassinated in a military coup, arguably cemented the subsistence crisis contract. It united the citizenry with aid donors and the political elites in an enduring consensus that protecting against such events was the priority for the state, and that a concerted effort of state, society and the international community was essential to ensure the masses of the population could be rendered resilient to such disasters (Hossain 2017).

The famine of 1974 was arguably a second 'tipping point' because the new state of Bangladesh was blamed for its failures to mount a substantial relief effort, a failure which contributed to the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million people (2 per cent of the population of the time) from hunger and from the diseases associated with starvation (Alamgir 1980). But between the Pakistani regime's failures in 1970 and those of an independent elected Bangladeshi government in 1974 there was a crucial difference: the latter owed to administrative ineptitude and inexperience, and to political calculations about which groups to feed that were undertaken out of desperation, rather than to a lack of political will (Hossain 2017). The state was technically bankrupt at this time. The US withheld the all-important food aid on grounds that Bangladesh had traded with Cuba, against Public Law 480 (US food aid) provisions (Sobhan 1979). In striking contrast to the callous neglect of the Yahya regime, the political leadership of brand new Bangladesh knew their failures to be a political as well as a human disaster in 1974. Bangladesh has never again experienced such a major disaster, despite the more than doubling of the population, its growing exposure to global economic volatilities, and the rising risk of climate change-related events (Dastagir 2015; Kreft and Eckstein 2013).

Into the present day, and in particular during the period when the global food crisis was sandwiched between cyclones in 2007 and 2009, the Government of Bangladesh has demonstrated strong and growing commitment to tackling the disasters its people are so regularly plagued by, and in particular the subsistence crises that often follow. It is this subsistence crisis contract that has provided the foundations on which human development has rested. Protection against disasters gave people the breathing space they needed to replenish and safeguard against the next crisis. It has given them the assurance that their state had their back, that they would not face tidal surges on their own, with nobody to help or indeed to care. These were among the political effects of Bhola.

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[1] The major English language political histories of Bangladesh's independence include (Maniruzzaman 1988; Sisson and Rose 1990); more recent interpretations include (Raghavan 2013) and (Lewis 2011).

[2] Exceptions include Ahmed (2013) and Khondker (1992). Mark Pelling's (2011) account offer an rare comparative analysis.

[3] On the relationship between democracy and famine as conceived by Sen, see (Devereux 2006; de Waal 2000). For more recent refinements of the democracy-famine relationship, see (Rubin 2009; Burchi 2011; Plümper and Neumayer 2009).

[4] On the cyclone itself, the best source remains (Frank and Husain 1971). The epidemiology of the disaster was covered by (Sommer and Mosley 1972).

[5] On environmental history in the colonial period, see (Iqbal 2010) and on patterns of settlement in the Bengal delta see (Bose 1986).

[6] It has only been since the devastating Gorky cyclone of 1991 that cyclone shelters have stopped being seen as an engineering project and a matter of meeting human needs. See (Alam and Collins 2010). A study of conditions only weeks before the November Bhola cyclone found the most vulnerable people lacked access to radios or other sources of information and could not hear cyclone warnings in time; many did not trust the warnings or were reluctant to leave their homes and crops to possible theft; or they lacked roads or transport to flee to often distant high land or safe places, and appropriate shelters were anyway rare (Islam 1971). Other estimates suggested that as much as 90 per cent of the population got the message, but only 1 per cent fled to stronger buildings, because they could not or would not go (Frank and Husain 1971). This is a tragically recurring concern in disaster management to the present day, resonating again with the problem of poor governance. See (Chowdhury et al. 1993; Haque 1997; Bimal Kanti Paul et al. 2010; Haque and Blair 1992; Bimal Kanti Paul 2012; Bimal Kanti Paul 2009; Bimal K. Paul and Dutt 2010).

[7] It was actually under Bhashani's leadership that the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League was originally set up, in 1949 (Rashiduzzaman 1970).

[8] Bhashani's decades of mobilizing ensured that addressing agrarian concerns – including crisis protection - were foremost among the mandates of the independent state of Bangladesh. To date Abid Bahar and Peter Custers are the most prominent studies of his political thinking and organization (Custers 2010; Bahar 2003).

[9] See (Chowdhury 2014). He had made similar calls to 'bid Pakistan farewell' in 1957, when demands for regional autonomy were denied by the regime; see (Rashiduzzaman 1970).

[10] Other views suggested political strategy played a part, for both Bhashani (who may have feared NAP (B) would not win many seats (Feldman 1978; Baxter 1971) and for the Awami League, who deemed it tactical for the election to go ahead while their campaign messages captured the outraged mood of the moment (S. Ghosh 1990).

[11] See (A. U. Ahmed 1983), whose electoral analysis suggests that the Awami League may have enjoyed a bump in 1970, as turnout was low and votes for the Awami League lower in the cyclone-hit areas in 1973, particularly in Noakhali.

[12] Found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDKGJRM0PY0 [accessed 15/05/15].

[13] See http://www.cpp.gov.bd/site/page/7bd9cae0-55b4-41cd-a3fb-776243dcd068/History (accessed August 20th 2016).

[14] On cyclone preparedness see (Haque 1997; Chowdhury et al. 1993; Bimal Kanti Paul 2012; Bimal Kanti Paul et al. 2010; Bimal K. Paul and Dutt 2010; Alam and Collins 2010; Haque and Blair 1992; Bimal Kanti Paul 2009) (Karim and Mimura 2008).

[15] (Islam 1971) found that fear of cyclones had almost no impact on the decisions of the people of the island Char Jabbar to remain, as most lacked land or alternative opportunities. See also (Reilly 2009). (Dove and Khan 1995) make the broader point that poverty and inequitable land tenurial relations underpin vulnerabilities to natural disaster, to cyclones specifically, in the south of Bangladesh.

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