



The Fall of East Pakistan and Liberation of Bangladesh

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After the promulgation of East Pakistan Razakar Ordinance of June 1, 1971, some Bengalis either volunteered or were recruited to work as a paramilitary force or collaborators for the Pakistan's military regime. They were called the Razakars. Some of the political parties that did not like the division of Pakistan actively sought out recruits for the Razakar (and other militia groups like the al-Shams and al-Badr) to fight and weaken the Mukti Bahini (the freedom fighters for Bangladesh) so that the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate state could be halted. More zealous of those party leaders even allowed their homes to be used as torture chambers for anyone suspected of belonging to the Mukti Bahini.

In Chittagong, I was told by Rafiq bhai's friends how the Goods Hill residence of Mr. Fazlul Quader Chowdhury, ex-Speaker of the Pakistan National Assembly, was used as a torture house for many

students and adults who were suspected of being members of the Mukti Bahini. Some members of the Razakar came also from the Urdu-speaking Bihari community. One day, my first cousin Munna bhai was picked up in Khulna City by some Razakars; he never returned. Apparently, he was killed.

The pro-Pakistani paramilitary groups terrorized the rural areas of East Pakistan trying to find Mukti Bahini, suspecting anyone young in age who had not joined their forces. Since an overwhelming majority of the East Pakistanis supported the freedom struggle, they would often pass on tactical information on the Razakars to the Mukti Bahini, and hide information on the latter when pressed by the Razakars. Thus, the Mukti Bahini had comparatively much more success in ambushing and killing the members of the Razakar. Consequently, by the last quarter of 1971, the recruits to Razakar fell drastically, and they hardly dared to go out of their camps without superior firepower coverage provided by the Pakistan military.

In his insightful book, *Witness to Surrender*, Brigadier General Siddique Salik (of Pakistan) estimated that Pakistan needed at least 250,000 to 300,000 troops, but even after organizing the Razakars (estimated strength 40,000), Pakistan could field only 150,000 (45,000 regular army, the rest paramilitary units) soldiers in East Pakistan.

By the last quarter of 1971, India had started not only providing material support to the Mukti Bahini but had also been training a select group of freedom fighters, who were called the Bangladesh Liberation Front (BLF), who would later come to be known as the Mujib Bahini. The force was mainly composed of young activists drawn from



the Awami League and its student front, the Chhatra League (Student League). At its height, it had reportedly 13,000 members (however, the actual figure, per Banglapedia, was probably much lower at 5,000). It was organized with the active assistance of Major General Sujan Singh Uban of the Indian Army. Former Student League leaders Serajul Alam Khan and Sheikh Fazlul Haque Mani, Tofael Ahmed, and Abdur Razzaq (MP) were the organizers of this special force.

It is postulated by some that Mujib Bahini was formed to meet the emergence of any alternative leadership in the event the liberation war was prolonged. Others think that the leaders of Mujib Bahini created this force because they were not satisfied with the working of Mujibnagar government in-exile [that was actually operating from a house (on 7 Theatre Road) in Kolkata] and were suspicious about the activities of the rightist faction of the Awami League. In the battlefield, the Mujib Bahini fought in cohesion with other freedom fighters. It carried out daring raids into the Pakistani occupation army's positions in the south, the south-west zone and in some areas around Dhaka. It was especially trained in guerrilla warfare and was equipped with comparatively better weapons. [Banglapedia]

After the Liberation War of 1971, the Mujib Bahini was merged with the auxiliary Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini, which earned ill-reputation for its heavy-handed counterterrorism and counter-insurgency activities against the Maoist Naxalites and anarchists.

During the liberation war, the BLF employed urban guerrilla tactics of hit-and-run against the Pakistani military establishment and the infra-structure in Chittagong city. Rafiq bhai who lived in our house 'Prantik' would often go out unnoticed at night carrying a small a pistol to blowout some electric transformers in the city either in a solo mission or with his comrades. Sometimes he would be missing for days, which would worry us all. He would later confide in me that he had carried out some hit-and-run operations with his BLF comrades. After his death, two other BLF guerillas resided in our house. They had Sten guns with them; but we did not find them as active as (martyred) Rafiq bhai was in carrying out hit-and-run guerilla warfare.

The Mukti Bahini guerrilla forces, on the other hand, came from all the walks of life and worked mostly under the supervision of pro-liberation members of the military, and were under direct command of the provisional government in-exile that was led by Tajuddin Ahmed of the Awami League. It grew in size and numbered around 100,000. [There were also some other irregular forces, e.g., Kader Bahini, that worked independently under local guerrilla leaders (like Kader Siddique).]

Some of those freedom fighters were teenagers. For example, four of my cadet friends – Mosharraf Hossain, Manish Dewan, Afzal ibn-Noor and Khairul Alam Belal – all teenagers joined the liberation war very early on, and were trained in Agartala in Tripura (India). Another classmate of mine, Shah Abdul Momin Hitlu, died a martyr in the early days of resistance, fighting against the Pakistan military forces. And there were many such highly spirited young men who joined the freedom fighters, risking their lives for national liberation.

With the added material support provided by the Indian government, the insurgency grew ever stronger, esp. from October onward. And with their guerilla-style hit-and-run tactics along the borders and retreat back to India when pursued, the morale of the Pakistan military, deployed in East Pakistan, waned down. The Indian troops moved in November 21 to assert control over territory in East Pakistan by force. It was quite evident that tensions would reach a climax towards triggering a full-blown war between India and Pakistan. That came on December 3, 1971.

The eventual failure of combating the insurgency caused Pakistan to attack Indian air bases in Jammu and Punjab on that day with the objective to stop the Indian support for the Mukti Bahini. [In fact, the Indian soldiers were already participating in the war since November 1971 when the freedom fighters had launched the Belonia battle.] In response, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared war at midnight, December 3. Thirteen days later, Pakistani troops under Lieutenant General A. A. K. Niazi surrendered in Dhaka. Bangladesh emerged as an independent state on December 16, 1971.

The surrendering Pakistani forces – numbering more than 90,000 - were taken to India as Prisoners of War (POWs). They were later released in 1974 to Pakistan after a supplement to the Simla Agreement (July 2, 1972) was signed about repatriation between India and Pakistan. Those released included 195 POWs who were accused of committing war crimes or genocide in Bangladesh.

Amid overwhelming public anger in Pakistan over the loss of East Pakistan, the chief martial law administrator (CMLA) General Yahya Khan resigned on December 20, 1971 and transferred power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who became president, commander-in-chief and the first civilian CMLA in Pakistan's history. Bhutto immediately placed General Yahya Khan under house arrest, and ordered the release of Sheikh Mujib, who was held prisoner by the Pakistan Army. To implement this, Bhutto reversed the verdict of Sheikh Mujib's court-martial trial that had taken place earlier, in which the latter was sentenced to death.

Bhutto also created a judicial commission in December 1971 with Chief Justice Hamoodur Rahman, the then Chief Justice of Supreme Court of Pakistan as its Chairman, to investigate military and political causes of the country's defeat in the 1971 war, or more specifically, "the circumstances in which the Commander, Eastern command, surrendered" and also to investigate the accusations of atrocities committed by the military personnel in 1971 in what was once East Pakistan. The commission's first report, prepared based on the interview of 213 people, was submitted to Bhutto in July 1972. After the return of the POWs, the inquiry was reopened. The final report, based on the interview of some 300 people altogether, also called supplementary report, was submitted on October 23, 1974, showed how political, administrative, military and moral failings were responsible for the surrender of Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. The commission challenged the claims by Bangladesh authorities that 3 million Bengalis had been killed by Pakistan army and 200,000 women were raped. The commission put the casualty figure as low as 26,000 civilian casualties.

The report accused the generals of what it called a premature surrender to India. The report said Pakistan's military ruler at the time, General Yahya Khan, 'permitted and even instigated' the surrender, and it recommended that he be publicly tried along with other senior military colleagues - General Abdul Hamid Khan (Chief of Staff, Army), Lieutenant General S.G.M.M. Pirzada, Lieutenant General Gul Hasan (Chief of General Staff), Major General Umar and Major General Mitha (commandant of Army SS Group) - for being party to a criminal conspiracy to illegally usurp power from President Mohammad Ayub Khan. Five other Lieutenant-Generals (which included Lt. General A.A.K. Niazi) and three Brigadier-Generals were recommended to be tried for willful neglect of duty during the 1971 War.

It is worth noting here that Lt. General Gul Hasan, who had become the Army Commander-in-Chief after the 1971 War, was ousted on March 3, 1972, and was dishonorably discharged from the army by Bhutto. His alleged involvement and controversial approvals of military operations in East Pakistan during 1971 created a public resentment towards him, as he was the Director-General for the Military Operations (DGMO). Bhutto later appointed General Tikka Khan as the new Chief of the Army Staff in March 1972, just about a year after the latter was responsible for directing the brutal military crackdown in Bangladesh.

Major General Mitha was particularly active in East Pakistan in the days preceding the military action of March 25, 1971. After General Yahya Khan had secretly departed on the evening of March 25, 1971, Major General Mitha is said to have remained behind. He allegedly planned the military action with Lt. General Tikka Khan, Major General Rao Farman Ali and Major General Khadim Hussain Raja. His retirement was announced by Bhutto in December 1971, months before the Commission report was submitted to him. After retirement he was stripped of his medals and pensions without due cause. He was, however, never court-martialed, as recommended by the Hamoodur Rahman Commission.

After his return to Pakistan, Lt. General Niazi was blamed for the defeat and was removed from the army in 1975. Though the Hamoodur Rahman Inquiry Commission had recommended his court-martial, Lt. General Niazi did not face a trial. The final report included his statement, which supports some allegations of war crimes against the Pakistani Army in the early days of Pakistani crackdown in East Pakistan: "Damage done during those early days of the military action could never be repaired, and earned for the military leaders names such as 'Changez Khan' and 'Butcher of East Pakistan.'" The report said, "He [Niazi] went on to add: "on the assumption of command I was very much concerned with the discipline of troops, and on 15th of April, 1971, that is within four days of my command, I addressed a letter to all formations located in the area and insisted that loot, rape, arson, killing of people at random must stop and a high standard of discipline should be maintained. I had come to know that looted material had been sent to West Pakistan which included cars, refrigerators and air conditioners etc." When asked about the alleged killing of East Pakistani officers and men during the process of disarming, the General replied that he had heard something of the kind but all these things had happened in the initial stages of the military action before his time. He denied the allegation that he ever ordered his subordinates to exterminate the Hindu minority. He denied that any intellectuals were killed during December, 1971. He admitted that there were a few cases of rape, but asserted that the guilty persons were duly punished." (Chapter 2)

The report quoted Brigadier Shah Abdul Qasim (witness No. 267) about the use of excessive force on the night between the 25th and 26th March 1971: "Army personnel acted under the influence of revenge and anger during the military operation."

The report also quoted Brigadier Iqbalur Rehman Shariff (Witness no. 269), who alleged that during his visit to formations in East Pakistan, General Gul Hassan used to ask the soldiers "how many Bengalis have you shot." The report quoted Lt. Col. Aziz Ahmed Khan (Witness no 276) who was Commanding Officer 8 Baluch and then CO 86 Mujahid Battalion: "Brigadier Arbbab also told me to destroy all houses in Joydepur. To a great extent I executed this order."

The Report said, "There is also evidence that Lt. Gen Tikka Khan, Major Gen. Farman Ali and Maj. Gen Khadim Hussain were associated with the planning of the military action. There is, however, nothing to show that they contemplated the use of excessive force or the commission of atrocities and excesses on the people of East Pakistan." (Chapter 2)

Interestingly, thus, the Commission did not find any of the major players, including Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and General Tikka Khan, guilty of the crisis which led to the dismemberment of Pakistan. As noted by Lt. General Niazi in his interview with journalist Amir Mir (December 2001), Pakistan's new Army chief General Tikka Khan and his boss President Bhutto did not want to open the Pandora's Box.

According to Lt. General Niazi, "Yahya and Bhutto viewed Mujib's victory in the 1970 election with distaste, because it meant that Yahya had to vacate the presidency and Bhutto had to sit in the Opposition benches, which was contrary to his aspirations. So these two got together and hatched a plan in Larkana, Bhutto's hometown, which came to be known as the Larkana Conspiracy. The plan was to postpone the session of the National Assembly indefinitely, and to block the transfer of power to the Awami League by diplomacy, threats, intrigues and the use of military force. Connected to this conspiracy was the 'M. M. Ahmed plan', which aimed at allowing Yahya and Bhutto to continue as president and prime minister, besides leaving East Pakistan without a successor government. After the announcement of the date of the assembly session (to be held at Dhaka), there was pressure on the politicians to boycott it. The reason given was that East Pakistan had become a hub of international intrigue, therefore, it should be discarded. In the end, this clique achieved its aim."

Commenting on the Hamoodur Rahman Commission of Inquiry Report, Lt. General Niazi said, "Similarly, Tikka has not been mentioned in the report, although his barbaric action of March 25 earned him the name of butcher. The commission overlooked his heinous crimes. As far as Rao Farman is concerned, he was in-charge of the Dhaka operations. According to authentic press reports, tanks, mortars and artillery were ruthlessly employed against the Dhaka University inmates, killing scores of them. Rao remained military adviser to five governors and had his finger in every pie."

In its concluding remarks on allegations of war crimes, the Hamoodur Rahman Commission of Inquiry Report said, "From what we have said in the preceding Paragraphs it is clear that there is substance in the allegations that during and after the military action excesses were indeed committed on the people of East Pakistan, but the versions and estimates put forward by the Dacca authorities are highly coloured and exaggerated... Irrespective, therefore, of the magnitude of the atrocities, we are of the considered opinion that it's necessary for the Government of Pakistan to take effective action to punish those who were responsible for the commission of these alleged excesses and atrocities." It further recommended a fruitful inquiry to be undertaken to investigate all the allegations by requesting the Dacca authorities to forward whatever evidences they might have.

In December 2000, almost 29 years after the inquiry was completed, the full report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission of Inquiry was finally declassified in Pakistan by President Parvez Musharraf's Military government.

Nearly 2,000 soldiers of India lost their lives in this war (while Pakistan lost nearly 1800 soldiers). Without India's material assistance, providing safe haven for guerrilla activities to operate from, it is unlikely that Bangladesh would have emerged as an independent nation within nine months. With the limited firepower at the disposal of the liberation forces for the ground and air battles, it is improbable that the Pakistan military could have been dislodged from their strongholds and defeated if they decided to hold on at any cost.

The chances are that the war would have dragged on for years while people's sufferings lingered on, something that we have seen in the Indian occupied Kashmir with the zero-sum guerrilla activities of the freedom fighters that are conveniently dubbed as terrorists by the Indian government. It is worth noting that during the liberation war, armed Maoists (pro-Chinese communists) and Naxalites were killing freedom fighters and Awami League leaders wherever they could for a plethora of reasons, including acting as a surrogate for Peking (Beijing) that was in friendly terms with Pakistan. The breakup of Pakistan was not desirable to them. It is also possible that the Mujibnagar government in-exile would have collapsed or split with powerful leaders like Mushtaq Ahmed opting for a deal for a loose federation with the authorities in Pakistan via channels in either Washington D.C. or Peking. Indian involvement in the war was well planned, while the same cannot be said of Pakistan whose military regime foolishly assumed that it could quickly settle the regional autonomy problem through strong arms tactics and massacre.

When the Indian military landed in Bangladeshi soil behind the local Mukti Bahini, people welcomed them with flower wreaths and hugged them, thanking them for their assistance to get rid of the Pakistan military. But within days, they saw the ugly faces

of the 'liberating' force, which looked more like invaders when they saw them looting everything that they could get their hands on to. [J.N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond*, p. 239] Ignoring local sensitivities, all the jute mills that had hitherto earned foreign exchange for its superior quality jute goods were robbed of their expensive equipment. The same was the fate with most factories.

Zainal Abedin, a former student leader and a freedom fighter who crossed over to India in 1971 and joined the Mujib Bahini, reminiscing about how the Indian handlers and RAW agents treated them: "The real Indian face lay bare after the surrender of Pakistani forces, when I saw the large-scale loot and plunder by the Indian Army personnel. The soldiers swooped on everything they found and carried them away to India. Curfew was imposed on our towns, industrial bases, ports, cantonments, commercial centers and even residential areas to make the looting easier. They lifted everything from ceiling fans to military equipment, utensils to water taps. Thousands of Army vehicles were used to carry looted goods to India. History has recorded few such cruel and heinous plunders. Such a large-scale plunder could not have been possible without connivance of higher Indian authorities." [Abedin, Zainal: *RAW and Bangladesh*, Madina Publications, Dhaka (1995)]

Zainal Abedin is not alone as a witness to Indian looting of Bangladeshi goods, industrial equipment and weapons left behind by the Pakistan forces.

At the request of Sheikh Mujib, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi pulled out Indian armed forces from Bangladesh on March 13, 1971. A flotilla of Soviet minesweepers arrived in Bangladesh shortly thereafter, ostensibly to clear Pakistani mines from Chittagong harbor. The prolonged Soviet presence, a source of suspicion among Awami League critics, ended in 1975 when Mujib's successors requested the Soviets to leave.

According to the CGI report on Bangladesh, immediately after liberation, regular Bangladeshi armed forces were quickly established but, because of budgetary constraints, on an extremely limited scale. The organization of these armed forces reflected not only that of the colonial British Indian Army, especially as it had continued under the Pakistan Army, but also the experience of the Mukti Bahini in the 1971 war of independence. Most of the guerrilla fighters reverted to civilian status, although some were absorbed into the regular armed forces. Countrywide, vast but undetermined numbers of small arms and automatic weapons remained at large in the population, presaging trouble in the years ahead.

A difficult residual issue was prisoner exchanges. India held about 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees, while Bangladesh retained 195 Pakistanis (mostly military) with the intent--later put aside--of bringing them to trial for war crimes. Pakistan also held some 28,000 Bengali military personnel stranded in West Pakistan. Under agreements reached by the governments of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan in August 1973 and April 1974, prisoner release and repatriation in all categories were completed by April 30, 1975.

The bitter rift between military personnel who returned to Bangladesh after liberation and freedom fighters who had fought in the war was to have profound consequences for the new nation. ¹

1. <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-1218.html>

Source : <https://www.ovimagazine.com/art/18307>