



Bangladesh Liberation War 1971

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This article is based on **“Endeavour, leadership and the story of a nation”** which was published in The Hindu on 26/04/2021. It talks about the significance of the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971.

The year 2021 marks the golden jubilee of the Muktijuddho or the Liberation War. Bangladesh's Independence in 1971 not only gave Bangladesh its freedom from the clutches of oppressive East Pakistan but changed the history and geopolitical scenario of South Asia.

Oppressive military action by the then west Pakistan's military led to a massive refugee and humanitarian crisis. The plight of the ten million refugees did have an impact on the Indian government and prompted it to launch a retaliatory action against Pakistan.

However, India's intervention was not only altruistic in nature, but was primarily based on realpolitik.

Bangladesh Liberation War 1971: Background

- **Political Imbalance:** In the 1950s the centralised Pakistani state was run undemocratically by a military-bureaucratic oligarchy dominated by West Pakistan. Under this system, Bengalis had no political say. But West Pakistan dominance was challenged in 1970 during general elections.
- **Landslide Victory of Awami League:** East Pakistan's Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League had a clear overall majority, enough to become the prime minister. However, west Pakistan was not willing to let a leader from its eastern provincial wing rule the country.
- **Cultural Differences:** The then West Pakistan (present Pakistan), under the leadership of Yahya Khan, started a brutal assault on the people of East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) who were demanding freedom because of the language and cultural differences between the two regions. After political negotiations failed, the Pakistani army under General Yahya Khan decided to start the crackdown.

- **Operation Searchlight:** West Pakistan kicked in operation searchlight across the whole of East Pakistan on March 26, 1971.
 - This resulted in millions of Bangladeshis fleeing to India, mainly West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura.
 - West Bengal, in particular, was massively burdened by the onrush of the refugees and the state appealed to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her government for assistance for food and shelter.
- **Indo-Bangla Cooperation:** With the subsequent bravery of the Indian Army coupled with the spirited fight put up by Mukti Bahini – the Bangladeshi guerilla resistance movement consisting of the Bangladeshi military, paramilitary and civilians – defeated the Pakistani forces.
- **Defeat of Pakistani Military:** On December 16, 1971, Lt Gen Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, the Chief Martial Law Administrator of East Pakistan and Commander of Pakistan Army forces located in East Pakistan signed the Instrument of Surrender.
 - Over 93,000 Pakistani troops surrendered to the Indian forces and Bangladesh Liberation forces making it the largest surrender since World War II.
 - The intervention brought a conclusion to the war in 13 short days and led to the birth of a new nation.

Bangladesh Liberation War 1971: Realpolitik or Altruism?

- **Diminishing the Two-front War Threat:** The East Pakistan uprising provided India with the opportunity to break up Pakistan and eliminate the threat of a two-front war in any future confrontation.

Although the eastern front remained largely inactive in 1965, it tied down substantial military resources that could have been deployed to greater effect in the western theatre.
- **Preventing Side-Lining of Pro-India Awami League:** India recognised that a drawn-out civil war in East Pakistan would radicalise the Bengali population.

This could lead to the side-lining of the pro-India Awami League and shift the leadership of the movement to left-wing pro-China parties such as the Bhashani-led National Awami Party and the Communist Party.
- **Negating Internal Security Threat:** The Guerrilla warfare, inspired by Maoist ideology, was the major form of resistance against the Pakistani military.

If India wouldn't have intervened in the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971, this could have been detrimental for India's internal security interests, especially in the context of the Naxalite movement which was then raging in eastern India.
- **Negating The Communal Threat:** By July-August 1971, 90% of the refugees were Hindus concentrated in the border districts of West Bengal with large Muslim populations.

Consequently, there was danger of serious communal strife if India did not act quickly to ensure their return.

- **Departure from Non-Alignment:** At the diplomatic level, India did not act entirely alone. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's carefully crafted diplomatic dispatches to world leaders had helped create a groundswell of support for the persecuted Bengalis of East Pakistan.
 - The signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty in August 1971 came as a shot-in-the-arm for India, encouraging it to stay the course.
 - The victory defined India's much broader role in foreign politics.
 - Many countries in the world, including the United States, realised that the balance of power had shifted to India in South Asia.

Conclusion

The ultimate accolade for India's role in creating a new nation is that Bangladesh is today a relatively prosperous country, having made steady progress from the category of a Least Developed Country to a developing country.

The creation of Bangladesh — from the ashes of East Pakistan — is presumably India's finest foreign policy triumph till date.

Drishti Mains Question

The campaign of 1971 achieved India's strategic objectives while still maintaining a humanitarian veneer for both domestic and international consumption. Comment.