7 The Independence of Bangladesh in 1971

7.1 Declaration of the Independence of Bangladesh, March 26, 1971

Many of the main Awami League leaders escaped the military crackdown and managed to get to India to seek asylum there. Moments before his arrest, in the first hours of March 26, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh. He did this by sending a wireless message to Chittagong which was broadcast by the Swadhin Bangla Biplobi Betar Kendra in Chittagong. His message was:

> *"This may be my last message. From today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh, wherever you are and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved."*

In the evening of March 27, Major Ziaur Rahman, a Bengali officer of the East Bengal Regiment, read out the declaration of independence of Bangladesh on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the same radio station in Chittagong.

March 26 is observed as Independence Day in Bangladesh. Amidst the ensuing chaos and confusion, this declaration was an inspiring message for the Bengalis.

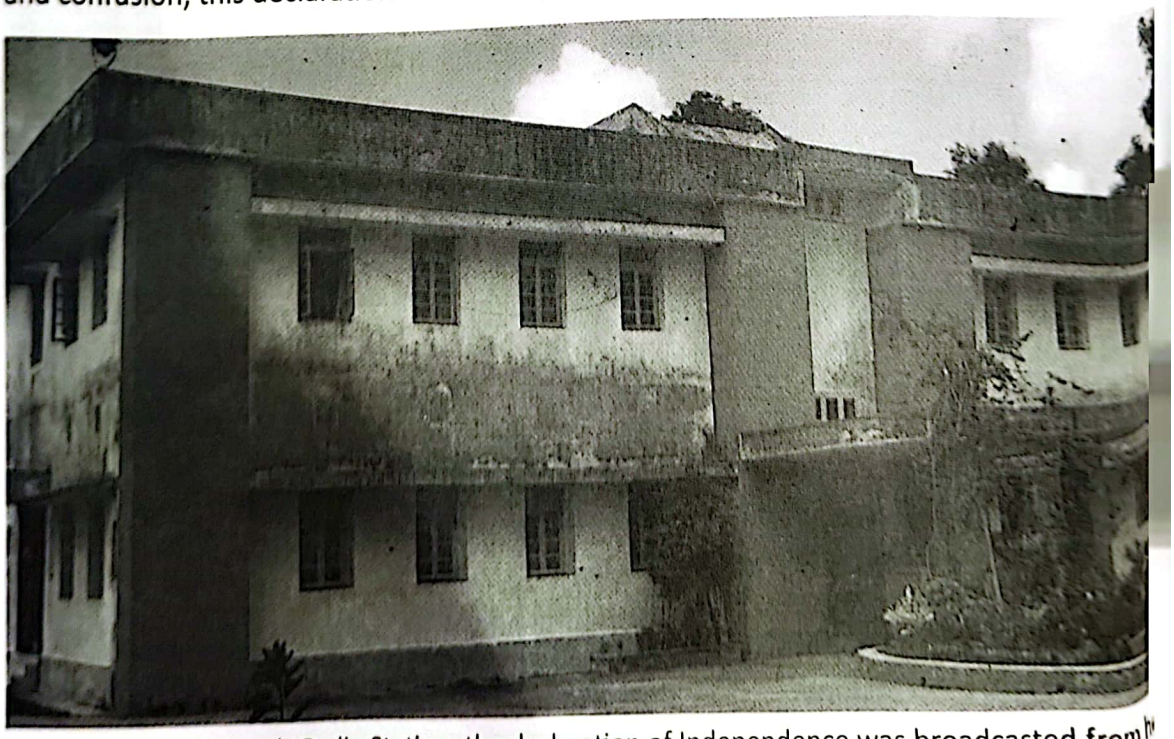


Figure 44: Swadhin Bangla Radio Station- the declaration of Independence was broadcasted from h

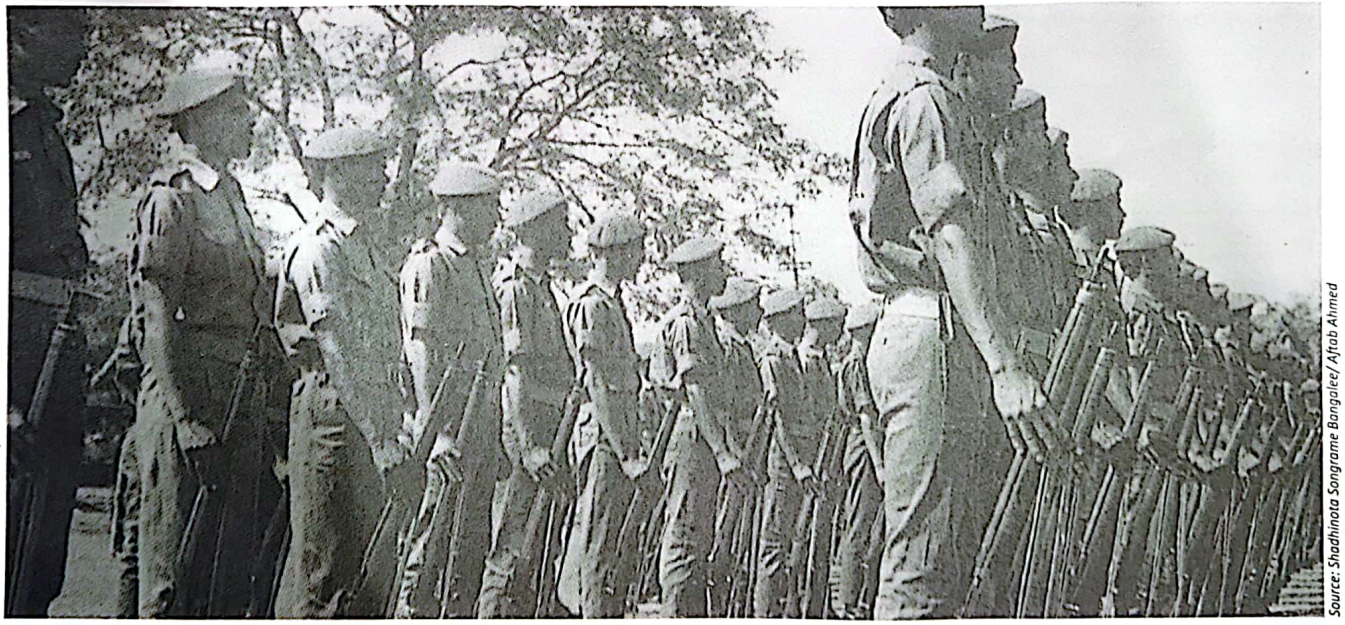
CamScanner

7.2 The War of Liberation: Formation of Mukti Bahini and Mujibnagar Government in Exile

The Pakistani army continued its attacks on Dhaka and other parts of East Pakistan. Many parts of Dhaka city were almost destroyed through burning and bombing. To stop the spread of the news of the atrocities reaching the outside world, the army restricted the movements of foreign journalists and imposed strict censorship on their reports.

Despite the dangers and threat to the East Pakistanis, a huge numbers of peasants, workers, students, young people, teachers, artists and intellectuals joined in fighting the occupying army of Pakistan.

Small bands and groups of freedom fighters were spontaneously organized, led by the Bengali soldiers, who later received shelter, food, training and arms from India. These groups of freedom fighters were eventually called the Mukti Bahini.



Source: Shadhinota Sangrame Bangalee/ Aftab Ahmed

Figure 45: : Freedom fighter's training

Thus, the Liberation War of Bangladesh spontaneously started immediately after the military crackdown without any central planning and coordination.

On April 10, 1971, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh was formed and the Proclamation of Independence was adopted.

On April 17, in the village of Vaidyanathtala of Meherpur district, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh took the oath and was formally inaugurated. This place was renamed Mujibnagar as the capital of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh. On the same day, Professor Yusuf Ali, Awami League member of the National Assembly, read out the Proclamation of Independence declaring March 26, 1971 as Independence Day.

CamScanner

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was elected President, but as he was imprisoned in a Pakistani jail, Vice President Syed Nazrul Islam became Acting President and Tajuddin Ahmed was the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government. It was essentially a government in exile as its functional base was in Kolkata, in the West Bengal state of India.

Mujibnagar Government in Exile

President
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Vice President (Acting President)	Syed Nazrul Islam	Home Minister	A. H. M. Qamaruzzaman
Prime Minister	Tajuddin Ahmed	Commander-in-Chief of the Mukti Bahini	Colonel (Retd.) Muhammad Ataul Ghani Osmani
Foreign Minister	Khandakar Mushtaq Ahmed	Chief-of-Staff of the Mukti Bahini	Col. (Retd.) Abdur Rob
Finance Minister	Captain (Retd.) Mansur Ali	Deputy Chief-of-Staff of the Mukti Bahini	Group Captain A. K. Khandkar

Figure 46: Colonel Osmani leading a demonstration vowing to join the fight for freedom

7.3 Organization and Coordination of Freedom Fighters

Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed appealed to other countries to recognize the independence of Bangladesh.

The Provisional Government provided central authority to lead, inspire, coordinate and guide the War for Liberation. It undertook the task of organizing and coordinating the spontaneously formed groups of resisting forces. It formed an armed group, consisting of the Bengali regular soldiers and officers of the Pakistan Army who rebelled. Many rebel Bengali members of the Police, and East Pakistan Rifles joined in.

They were treated as a regular force. Besides this group of the Mukti Bahini, many civilian men and women– students, youths, peasants, workers, and people from other occupations– helped form a guerilla force which played a very important role in the Liberation War.

Women Freedom Fighters

One of the greatest shortcomings in the perception of our fight for Independence is our consistent failure to recognize the role of women in our Liberation War. In fact, the role of women is largely ignored, denied and misconstrued in our mainstream history. This is because of our general tendency to think of war only in terms of physical fighting and exchange of gunshots. But our Liberation war or any war for that matter, which has involved the entire population of the country, has been a struggle through which a united nation has asserted its aspiration for freedom. Such wars are not fought only in the battlefields, neither are they fought only with guns. War heroes include those women who have supported the valiant freedom fighters with food, shelter, funds; who have nursed the wounded and hid weapons risking their own lives. They also include those who have willingly given their sons to war, who have lost their loved ones and even worse been subjected to sexual abuse and still survived to tell their stories.

Excerpt taken from 'Muktir Kotha' told by one of the many unknown women freedom fighters, Maiful.

Bir Protik Taramon Bibi fought against Pakistanis in the Liberation War in her village home in Shankar Madhabpur, Kurigram. She was in Sector 11 under the leadership of Sector commander Abu Taher, Bir Uttam. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government honored her with the Bir Protik title in 1973 for her courageous role in resisting the Pakistan occupation force with weapons. Taramon had to fight with arms on many occasions. She was known for being a good marksman.

CamScanner

However, Taramon has said that though the country has recognized the contributions of many freedom fighters and also provided a certain amount of financial assistance to them she has never received any kind of monetary benefit from any of the governments.

Dr. Captain (Rtd.) Sitara Begum is the only other woman besides Taramon Bibi to get the 'Bir Protik' award for gallantry in the Liberation War. After she received her medical degree, she joined as a lieutenant in the army's medical corps in 1970. She ran a medical center in Meghalaya during the war.

Excerpt adapted from The Women in Our Liberation War: Tales of Endurance and Courage, Aasha Mehreen Amin, Lavina Ambreen Ahmed and Shamim Ahsan, December 16, 2006.

The provisional government divided the area of Bangladesh into 11 sectors and each sector was assigned to one Sector Commander. The irregular guerrilla forces along with the regular force were engaged in war under the command of the Sector Commanders. Sector Ten had no territorial demarcation as this was formed by the Naval Commandos.

Three brigades were formed known as 'K' Force, 'S' Force and 'Z' Force consisting of the members of the regular armed battalion. Most of the soldiers came from East Pakistan Rifles and East Bengal Regiment. And all these brigades were assigned separate commanders. 'K' Force was under the command of Major (later Major General) Khaled Mosharraf.

Biography

Khaled Mosharraf (1938 – 1975) distinguished himself as a Sector Commander of the war of Liberation in 1971.

After successfully resisting the Pakistan army, he retreated to Tripura at the end of April 1971. He was appointed Sector Commander of Sector 2. In an encounter with the enemy he was wounded by a bullet in his head, and recovered after a long treatment. In recognition of his heroic contribution, he was honored with the state insignia of Bir Uttam.

After Liberation, he was elevated to the post of Chief of General Staff of Bangladesh Army. He was killed in a counter-coup on November 7, 1975.

'S' Force was under the command of Major (later Major General) K. M. Shafiullah. He was the Sector Commander of Sector 3. Bangladesh government awarded him the title Bir Uttam for his bravery and dedication. He was appointed as the Chief of Army Staff of Bangladesh Army on April 5, 1972.

CamScanner

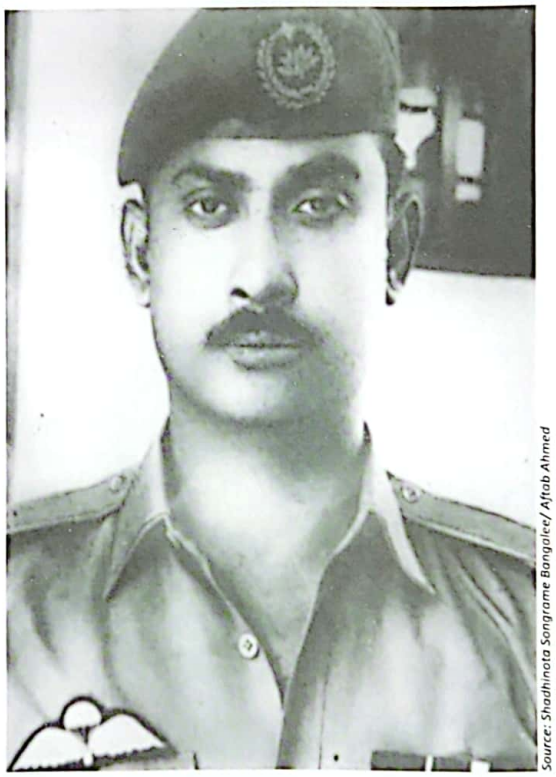
"Z" Force was under the command of Major (later Lt. General) Ziaur Rahman. Major Ziaur Rahman distinguished himself as an important Sector Commander and later on as the head of the "Z" Force. For his heroic contribution to the Liberation of his country, he was also awarded Bir Uttam. His courage and steadfastness in the hour of crisis earned him popularity amongst his soldiers, which proved to be vital for his later achievements.

Biography

Ziaur Rahman (1936 – 1981) became the President of Bangladesh in the post-Mujib era. He became the Chief of Army Staff on August 25, 1975 and had been a leading freedom fighter.

Ziaur Rahman was born on January 19, 1936 in Bogra.

In 1953, he joined the Pakistan Military Academy as an officer cadet and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1955. He also gained experience as a military intelligence officer from 1959 to 1964. He was sent to West Germany for higher military training. Upon his return from Germany in 1970, he was transferred to Eighth East Bengal Regiment in Chittagong as its second in command.



Source: Shadhinota Songrame Bangalee/ Aftab Ahmed

Figure 47: Ziaur Rahman

On the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistani military cracked down on the Bengali civilians and armed rebels to destroy the people's movement for an independent Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib was arrested and other leading Bengali politicians dispersed. At this critical moment in Bangladesh's history, Major Ziaur Rahman revolted against the Pakistan Army and, on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, read out the declaration of the independence of Bangladesh over a clandestine radio in Chittagong.

In 1973, he was promoted to the rank of Major General in the Bangladesh Army. In crucial and difficult moments in Bangladesh's history, he came forward to lead his nation riding on the crest of popular sentiment. After the brutal and tragic assassination of Sheikh Mujib, there was a struggle for power both within the civilian politicians and also the military leaders.

CamScanner

Ziaur Rahman came forward as a leader who managed to stabilize the institutions of the government and state in Bangladesh. On November 7, 1975, he was catapulted to the center of power by a popular civil-military alliance.

He became President of Bangladesh, withdrew Martial Law and restored multi-party democracy in Bangladesh. He made constitutional, political, economic and social reforms during his tenure.

He started implementing a massive development initiative based on his famous 19 Point Program. He was also the architect of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, SAARC.

But a power struggle was going on within the Bangladesh Army which resulted in several coup attempts against his regime. General Zia tried to face them boldly and began the process of bringing discipline and order in the army chain of command.

However, on May 30, 1981, Ziaur Rahman was assassinated in an abortive coup in Chittagong by a faction of the army.

General Zia's legacy of Bangladeshi nationalism, multi-party democracy, supremacy of the civil administration over military, and politics and economics of production and development found widespread support in Bangladesh.

Biography

Colonel Abu Taher (1938 – 1976) was a prominent Sector Commander in the war of liberation. In July 1971, he joined the war of liberation and was appointed the Sector Commander of Sector 11. He was seriously wounded on November 14, 1971 while launching an attack on an enemy camp at Kamalpur. He was honored with the gallantry award Bir Uttam.

In April 1972 he was appointed the Adjutant General of Bangladesh Army. He resigned from the army in September 1972. Colonel Taher organized the uprising of the soldiers and people on November 7, 1975. He was tried by a military tribunal and sentenced to death.

Around June-July 1971 the 'Bangladesh Liberation Force' (BLF) was formed. It was more popularly known as Mujib Bahini (Mujib's Army) due to its loyalty to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was formed by student leaders. It was mainly composed of the activists drawn from the Awami League and its student front Chhatra League. It was organized in India with assistance from some members of the Indian army.

CamScanner

7.4 Collaborators of the Pakistani Army

Inhuman atrocities and war crimes, such as mass killings, rape of women, torture of suspects, and burning and destruction of property, were committed by the Pakistan Army with the support of their local collaborators. The collaborators, known as Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams, aided the Pakistani Army in their killing and oppression. These armed cadres were members of the Jamaat-i-Islami, a political organization that was opposed to the idea of Bangladesh and against the ideology of nationalism and secularism. They felt the break-up of Pakistan would weaken Islam in South Asia. These pro-Pakistani Bengali and non-Bengali para-militias helped the Pakistani Army in carrying out its heinous policy of targeted genocide against Hindus and Bengali nationalists. Their aim was to kill and drive out the Hindu minority of East Pakistan to India and "Islamize" Bengali Muslims by wiping out Bengali cultural and linguistic elements thought to be "pro-Hindu" and "pro-Indian".

Source: Shadhinota Sangrame Bangalee/ Aftab Ahmed

Figure 48: Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams carrying out protests against the fight for freedom for Bangladesh

7.5 Unity of the Bengali Nation

The vast majority of Bengalis found a way to support the cause of Bangladesh, either by fighting or through more indirect methods, such as providing information, and food and shelter to the Mukti Bahini. Thus, the Bengali Muslim identity, which originated in the late 19th century in the eastern Bengal delta, developed into a coalition of its vernacular elite and peasantry in the first half of the 20th century and matured into an unprecedented and all-out unity of the Bengali nation in 1971. The dream of 'Pakistan as a peasant utopia' turned into a dream of a people's state– Bangladesh.

CamScanner

Many indigenous people played an active role in the Liberation War, hoping that their position would also be better in an independent Bangladesh. But, both Chakma king Tridiv Roy and the brother of the Bohmong king sided with Pakistan.

7.6 Strategy and Tactics of the Freedom Fighters and the Role of India

As a combination of regular soldiers and irregular freedom fighters, the Mukti Bahini was not in a position to directly confront the well-equipped and heavily fortified Pakistan Army. Therefore they adopted strategies and tactics like guerilla warfare. They used to attack the enemy forces, cause as much as damage possible and quickly withdraw. The guerrilla forces used speed and stealth to organize in small units to attack the West Pakistani forces.

These ambush and sabotage tactics were very effective in demoralizing the Pakistan Army. The Pakistan Army was entrenched in its cantonments and remote camps, isolated from and distrusted by the local populace. These hit and run tactics were causing severe damage to the Pakistan Army.

However, by means of these tactics alone, it would have taken a long time to liberate Bangladesh. By that time, the genocide of Bengalis by the Pakistani Army would have taken the lives of millions of people.

Therefore, at the beginning of December 1971, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh in exile persuaded the friendly Indian government led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to help the Mukti Bahini in defeating the Pakistan Army decisively and thus liberate Bangladesh. Indira Gandhi decided to send in the Indian armed forces because it was getting very difficult and costly to manage about 10 million refugees from Bangladesh who had taken shelter in neighboring Indian states. The Indian government even had to introduce a new tax called the "refugee tax" to operate the refugee camps

Figure 49: Determined freedom fighters of Bangladesh

On March 31, 1971, the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had moved a resolution in both Houses of the Indian Parliament expressing "profound sympathy for and solidarity with the people of East Bengal in their struggle for a democratic way of life." Indira Gandhi then visited many Western states to gain support and mold public opinion in favor of Bangladesh.

7.7 Role of Foreign Powers

The big powers of the world also played a role, as they usually do in conflicts all over the world. The then Soviet Union played a significant role in the war. The Soviet Union used its veto power in the UN Security Council (the organization responsible for maintaining international peace and security) to ensure a ceasefire until the Joint Command of the Indian armed forces and the Mukti Bahini could capture Dhaka. Their aim was achieved.

The US government supported Pakistan during the Liberation War. It helped Pakistan by supplying arms and providing diplomatic support. It sent its Seventh Fleet to the Indian Ocean as a show of force, but due to Soviet counteraction, it did not put the Seventh Fleet into military action. The US also conducted diplomatic efforts in the UN Security Council for a ceasefire in favor of Pakistan when Pakistan was on the verge of defeat.

As China had a strategic relationship with Pakistan against their common enemy– India– and, as China was in competition with the Soviet Union to be the sole leader of the international communist bloc, it did not support Bangladesh in the war.

Did you know?

The 'Concert for Bangladesh', organized in New York by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar in August 1971, united many Rock stars and some of the Indian subcontinent's finest classical musicians. It helped bring international attention to the cause of Bangladesh.

7.8 India-Pakistan War in December 1971

On November 21, the Indian troops covertly moved into East Pakistan, and on December 3, Pakistan declared war on India. On December 6, Bhutan and India formally recognized the independent and sovereign state of Bangladesh.

A full-scale war had broken out between India and Pakistan on both eastern and western fronts. About 4,000 officers and soldiers of the Indian armed forces died in the ensuring battles. The Indian Forces and the Mukti Bahini formed combined forces and directed attacks within East Pakistan. At the same time, the Indian Air Force conducted air raids on important Pakistani installations. The Indian Navy also joined in this operation.

CamScanner

Within a few days, the combined forces of India and Bangladesh encircled Dhaka and the Pakistani Forces were isolated and demoralized. Finally the armed forces of Pakistan unconditionally surrendered on 16 December 1971 and hence ended the brutal nine-month fight for freedom.

Figure 50: Pakistani forces officially signing the agreement to surrender in the Liberation War of 1971

7.9 December 14, 1971– Martyred Intellectuals' Day

A number of university professors from Dhaka University were killed during the first few days of the war, because they had a strong influence on the development of Bengali nationalism. However, the most extreme cases of targeted killing of intellectuals took place during the last few days of the war.

On December 14, 1971, only two days before surrendering to the Indian military and the Mukti Bahini, the Pakistani army– with the assistance of local leaders and groups that chose to ally themselves with the Pakistani military, most notably the Al Badr and Al Shams– systematically executed over 200 of East Pakistan's intellectuals and scholars. Professors, journalists, doctors, artists, engineers and writers were rounded up in Dhaka, blindfolded and taken to the outskirts of the city and executed en masse. In memory of these atrocities, December 14 is mourned in Bangladesh as the Day of Martyred Intellectuals.

7.10 December 16, 1971– Victory Day

On December 16, 1971, Lt. General Ameer Abdullah Khan Niazi, Commander of the Pakistan occupation forces in East Pakistan, surrendered to the Joint Command of the Bangladesh Mukti Bahini and Indian Allied Forces at the Race Course Maidan (presently Suhrawardy Uddyan) along with 93,000 soldiers.

CamScanner

Thus the Liberation War had been won and a new state was established– the independent and sovereign state of Bangladesh. But this victory came at a huge human, economic and social cost. Millions of Bengalis were brutally murdered and thousands of women were raped. Many became refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods, and went to India to take shelter. Many more were internal refugees, displaced from their homes.

Figure 51: December 16 is celebrated as Victory Day in Bangladesh

Timeline 7.1: The Independence of Bangladesh in 1971

March 26, 1971
Declaration of Independence; beginning of the War of Liberation

April 10, 1971
Mujibnagar government formed

April 17, 1971
Mujibnagar Government in exile took Oath

December 3 – 4, 1971
Pakistan and India at war

December 14, 1971
Bengali Intellectuals martyred

December 16, 1971
Pakistan Military Forces in East Pakistan surrendered to the Joint Command of India-Bangladesh Allied Forces;
Bangladesh gained Independence

CamScanner