

The Complete Treatise on the Bangladeshi Liberation War:

A Comprehensive Analysis of the 1971 Independence Struggle

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Abstract

The Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971 represents one of the most significant independence movements of the twentieth century, fundamentally reshaping the political landscape of South Asia. This comprehensive treatise examines the multifaceted dimensions of the conflict through historical, political, military, social, and international perspectives.

The analysis encompasses the deep-rooted causes of the independence movement, the systematic oppression that precipitated the conflict, the military strategies employed by both liberation forces and the Pakistan Army, and the extensive international diplomatic efforts that influenced the war's outcome.

Through detailed examination of primary sources, military records, diplomatic correspondence, and survivor testimonies, this study provides a complete understanding of how East Pakistan transformed into the independent nation of Bangladesh. The treatise further explores the war's lasting impact on regional geopolitics, human rights discourse, and the principles of self-determination in the post-colonial world.

The treatise ends with "The End"

Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Historical Context and Background	3
2.1	The Partition Legacy (1947-1970)	3
2.2	Political Marginalization and the Six-Point Program	3
3	Immediate Causes and the Road to War	4
3.1	The 1970 Elections and Political Crisis	4
3.2	Operation Searchlight and the Genocide	4
4	Military Dimensions of the Conflict	5
4.1	Asymmetric Warfare and Guerrilla Strategy	5
4.2	Naval and Air Operations	5
5	International Dimensions and Diplomatic Aspects	5
5.1	The Refugee Crisis and Indian Involvement	5
5.2	Cold War Dynamics and Great Power Politics	6
5.3	United Nations and International Legal Aspects	6

6	Social and Cultural Impact	7
6.1	Identity Formation and National Consciousness	7
6.2	Women’s Participation and Gender Dynamics	7
7	Economic Consequences and Reconstruction	7
7.1	Wartime Economic Disruption	7
7.2	Post-Independence Economic Challenges	8
8	Aftermath and Long-term Consequences	8
8.1	Political Development and Democratic Challenges	8
8.2	Regional and International Relations	8
8.3	Memory, Commemoration, and Historical Legacy	9
9	Conclusion	9

1 Introduction

The Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971 stands as a watershed moment in South Asian history, marking the violent birth of Bangladesh from the eastern wing of Pakistan. This conflict, lasting nine months from March to December 1971, encompassed elements of civil war, international conflict, and genocide, ultimately resulting in the creation of the world's eighth most populous nation. The war's complexity extends beyond mere territorial dispute, incorporating profound questions of ethnic identity, linguistic rights, economic exploitation, and political self-determination that continue to resonate in contemporary international relations.

The significance of this conflict transcends its immediate geographical boundaries, establishing important precedents for humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect civilian populations, and the role of international law in addressing systematic human rights violations. The war demonstrated how internal political grievances could escalate into international crises, drawing in major powers and reshaping regional alliances in ways that continue to influence South Asian geopolitics today.

This treatise employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing upon historical methodology, political science analysis, military strategic studies, sociological examination, and international relations theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict. The analysis is grounded in extensive primary source material, including government documents, military records, diplomatic correspondence, contemporary media accounts, and oral histories from participants and survivors.

2 Historical Context and Background

2.1 The Partition Legacy (1947-1970)

The roots of the 1971 Liberation War trace directly to the partition of British India in 1947, which created Pakistan as a bifurcated nation separated by over 1,000 miles of Indian territory. This geographical anomaly, combined with significant cultural, linguistic, and economic differences between West and East Pakistan, created inherent structural tensions that would eventually prove insurmountable.

East Pakistan, despite containing the majority of Pakistan's population, found itself systematically marginalized in political, economic, and cultural spheres. The imposition of Urdu as the sole national language, despite Bengali being spoken by the majority of Pakistan's citizens, became the first major flashpoint. The Language Movement of 1952, culminating in the deaths of student protesters on February 21, established linguistic rights as a fundamental aspect of Bengali identity and resistance to West Pakistani dominance.

Economic disparities between the two wings became increasingly pronounced throughout the 1950s and 1960s. East Pakistan, despite generating significant foreign exchange through jute exports, received disproportionately low development spending and industrial investment. The concentration of Pakistan's military, bureaucratic, and industrial establishments in the western wing created a colonial-like relationship between West and East Pakistan, with the eastern region serving as a source of raw materials and market for finished goods produced in the west.

2.2 Political Marginalization and the Six-Point Program

The political awakening of East Pakistan gained momentum under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League. The Six-Point Program, announced in 1966, articulated East Pakistan's demands for autonomy in a federal structure that would address the region's grievances while maintaining Pakistani unity. These points included demands for a federal government limited to defense and foreign affairs, separate currencies or fiscal measures

to prevent capital flight from east to west, independent taxation powers, separate accounts for foreign exchange earnings, provincial control over militia and paramilitary forces, and the establishment of a naval headquarters in East Pakistan.

The Six-Point Program represented a constitutional and democratic approach to resolving inter-wing disparities, yet it was met with fierce resistance from West Pakistani political and military establishments. The arrest of Sheikh Mujib and other Awami League leaders in the Agartala Conspiracy Case (1968) demonstrated the military government's unwillingness to accommodate Bengali political aspirations through democratic means, further radicalizing public opinion in East Pakistan.

The mass uprising of 1969, which forced the resignation of President Ayub Khan, revealed the depth of popular support for the autonomy movement. However, the transfer of power to another military leader, General Yahya Khan, indicated that fundamental structural changes in Pakistan's governance would not be forthcoming through existing political processes.

3 Immediate Causes and the Road to War

3.1 The 1970 Elections and Political Crisis

The general elections of December 1970 produced a clear mandate for the Awami League, which won 160 out of 162 seats allocated to East Pakistan in the National Assembly, giving it an absolute majority in the 313-member legislature. This electoral victory provided democratic legitimacy to the Six-Point Program and Sheikh Mujib's claim to form the national government. However, the results were unacceptable to West Pakistani political and military elites, who viewed Bengali political dominance as an existential threat to their interests.

The Pakistan People's Party, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, won a plurality in West Pakistan but refused to attend the National Assembly session scheduled for March 3, 1971. Bhutto's declaration that his party would "break the legs" of any member who attended the session effectively prevented the formation of a democratic government. General Yahya Khan's decision to postpone the Assembly session indefinitely on March 1, 1971, triggered immediate and massive protests throughout East Pakistan.

The period from March 1-25, 1971, witnessed the emergence of a parallel government structure in East Pakistan, with Sheikh Mujib's directives being followed more readily than those from Islamabad. The non-cooperation movement demonstrated the complete breakdown of Pakistani governmental authority in the eastern wing, while negotiations between Mujib and Yahya Khan provided a facade of seeking political solution while military preparations for suppression continued.

3.2 Operation Searchlight and the Genocide

The Pakistani military's response to the political crisis culminated in Operation Searchlight, launched on the night of March 25, 1971. This systematic military operation targeted Bengali intellectuals, students, political leaders, and civilians in a deliberate attempt to crush the independence movement through terror and mass killing. The operation began with simultaneous attacks on Dhaka University, the Awami League headquarters, police barracks, and residential areas known to harbor Bengali nationalists.

The scale and systematic nature of the violence that followed constitutes what many scholars and international observers have classified as genocide. The Pakistani military, supported by local collaborators organized into auxiliary forces such as Al-Badr and Al-Shams, implemented a campaign of mass killing, systematic rape, and forced displacement that targeted the Bengali population as a whole, with particular focus on intellectuals, religious minorities, and potential political leaders.

Conservative estimates place the death toll at 300,000, though many researchers and the Government of Bangladesh maintain that up to three million people were killed during the nine-month conflict. The systematic nature of sexual violence, with an estimated 200,000 women raped, constituted a deliberate strategy to terrorize the population and destroy social fabric. The refugee crisis, with nearly ten million East Pakistanis fleeing to India, created a humanitarian catastrophe that drew international attention and intervention.

4 Military Dimensions of the Conflict

4.1 Asymmetric Warfare and Guerrilla Strategy

The Bangladeshi liberation struggle employed classic asymmetric warfare tactics, with the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Forces) adopting guerrilla strategies against the conventional Pakistani military. The liberation forces, initially composed of Bengali officers and soldiers who rebelled against the Pakistani army, evolved into a sophisticated resistance network that controlled significant portions of rural East Pakistan.

The military strategy of the liberation forces focused on disrupting Pakistani supply lines, attacking isolated outposts, and maintaining pressure on urban centers while avoiding direct confrontation with superior Pakistani firepower. The Mukti Bahini's knowledge of local terrain, support from the rural population, and coordination with Indian military advisors enabled them to sustain operations despite being outgunned and outnumbered by Pakistani forces.

The Pakistani military strategy relied on controlling major urban centers and transportation networks while conducting punitive operations against areas suspected of supporting the independence movement. However, the army's inability to win civilian support, combined with overextension across a hostile territory and mounting casualties, gradually eroded Pakistani military effectiveness.

4.2 Naval and Air Operations

The liberation war witnessed significant naval and air operations that demonstrated the conflict's evolution beyond guerrilla warfare. The Indian Navy's involvement included both covert support for liberation forces and overt operations following the formal declaration of war in December 1971. The naval blockade of East Pakistan ports severely restricted Pakistani military resupply and civilian imports, contributing to the eventual collapse of Pakistani resistance.

Air operations played a crucial role in both phases of the conflict. During the liberation war phase (March-December 1971), limited air assets were used primarily for transport and reconnaissance, though some Bengali pilots who defected established the rudimentary Bangladesh Air Force. The formal Indo-Pakistani War phase (December 3-16, 1971) saw intensive air operations on both the eastern and western fronts, with Indian air superiority in the east contributing significantly to the rapid Pakistani collapse.

The coordination between liberation forces and Indian military units represented a sophisticated example of unconventional warfare support, with Indian training camps in border areas providing instruction in guerrilla tactics, weapons handling, and communication procedures. This support proved crucial in maintaining liberation force effectiveness throughout the extended conflict.

5 International Dimensions and Diplomatic Aspects

5.1 The Refugee Crisis and Indian Involvement

The massive refugee influx into India created both humanitarian obligations and strategic opportunities that fundamentally altered the conflict's character. The burden of supporting nearly

ten million refugees placed enormous strain on Indian resources and threatened social stability in border regions. This humanitarian crisis provided India with both moral justification and practical necessity for intervention in East Pakistan.

Indian support for the liberation movement evolved from humanitarian assistance to active military backing. The training of liberation fighters in Indian camps, provision of weapons and equipment, and coordination of operations represented a significant escalation in Indian involvement. The decision to formally recognize Bangladesh as an independent nation in December 1971 and launch coordinated military operations marked the transformation from proxy conflict to interstate war.

The refugee crisis also served as a catalyst for international attention and diplomatic intervention. The massive human displacement and reports of systematic atrocities created pressure on the international community to respond, though the effectiveness of this response varied significantly among different nations and international organizations.

5.2 Cold War Dynamics and Great Power Politics

The Bangladeshi Liberation War became deeply embedded in Cold War rivalry, with the United States and China supporting Pakistan while the Soviet Union backed India. This alignment reflected broader strategic calculations rather than support for the specific causes at stake in East Pakistan. American support for Pakistan was motivated by the ongoing rapprochement with China and the strategic importance of Pakistani cooperation in opening channels to Beijing.

The Soviet Union's support for India was driven by its desire to counter Chinese influence in South Asia and strengthen ties with a major non-aligned nation. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, signed in August 1971, provided India with diplomatic cover and potential military support for its involvement in the East Pakistan crisis.

The involvement of great powers transformed a regional conflict into a global confrontation, with the movement of the US Seventh Fleet into the Bay of Bengal representing the most dramatic escalation of international tension. The Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean served as a counterbalance, demonstrating how regional conflicts could trigger broader great power confrontations during the Cold War era.

5.3 United Nations and International Legal Aspects

The response of the United Nations and other international organizations to the East Pakistan crisis revealed significant limitations in the international system's capacity to prevent or halt systematic human rights violations. Despite overwhelming evidence of mass atrocities, the UN Security Council was paralyzed by great power rivalries and the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs.

The legal dimensions of the conflict raised important questions about the right to self-determination, the legitimacy of intervention to prevent genocide, and the responsibility of the international community to protect civilian populations. The systematic nature of violence against the Bengali population met many criteria for genocide as defined in international law, yet the international response remained largely limited to humanitarian assistance and diplomatic protests.

The eventual recognition of Bangladesh by the international community established important precedents for the recognition of states created through liberation struggles, though the specific circumstances of international intervention complicated the application of self-determination principles to other conflicts.

6 Social and Cultural Impact

6.1 Identity Formation and National Consciousness

The liberation war served as a crucible for Bangladeshi national identity, transforming regional grievances into a cohesive independence movement. The shared experience of resistance, sacrifice, and ultimate victory created powerful national myths and symbols that continue to shape Bangladeshi political culture. The concept of the "spirit of liberation war" became central to post-independence political discourse, invoking ideals of democracy, secularism, nationalism, and socialism.

The war's impact on cultural expression was profound, generating a vast literature of poetry, prose, music, and visual arts that celebrated resistance and mourned sacrifice. The cultural movement that had begun with the Language Movement of 1952 reached full expression during the liberation war, with Bengali language and culture serving as primary markers of national identity in opposition to West Pakistani dominance.

The role of intellectuals, students, and cultural figures in the independence movement created lasting connections between cultural expression and political activism in Bangladesh. The systematic targeting of intellectuals by Pakistani forces and their collaborators was recognized as an attempt to destroy the cultural foundations of Bengali nationalism, making cultural preservation and development a patriotic duty.

6.2 Women's Participation and Gender Dynamics

The participation of women in the liberation war represented a significant departure from traditional gender roles in Bengali society. Women served as combatants, intelligence gatherers, medical personnel, and support staff for liberation forces, demonstrating capabilities that challenged prevailing social norms. The formal recognition of women freedom fighters in post-independence Bangladesh acknowledged their contributions to the independence struggle.

However, the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war created lasting trauma and social complications. The designation of rape survivors as "war heroines" by Sheikh Mujib represented an attempt to restore honor and social acceptance, though the effectiveness of such measures in overcoming social stigma remains debated. The experience of sexual violence during the war contributed to increased awareness of women's rights and gender-based violence in Bangladeshi society.

The war's impact on family structures was profound, with hundreds of thousands of families experiencing loss of male breadwinners, displacement, and social disruption. The necessity for women to assume greater economic and social responsibilities during and after the war contributed to gradual changes in gender roles, though traditional patriarchal structures remained largely intact.

7 Economic Consequences and Reconstruction

7.1 Wartime Economic Disruption

The nine-month conflict devastated East Pakistan's economy, with systematic destruction of infrastructure, industrial facilities, and agricultural resources. The Pakistani military's scorched earth tactics included destruction of bridges, communication networks, and economic installations to deny their use to liberation forces. The refugee exodus removed significant portions of the skilled workforce and disrupted agricultural production during crucial planting and harvesting seasons.

The economic cost of the war extended beyond physical destruction to include the collapse of financial systems, disruption of trade relationships, and the burden of supporting displaced

populations. The pre-war economic grievances that had fueled the independence movement were compounded by wartime destruction, creating enormous challenges for post-independence economic development.

The loss of human capital through killing, displacement, and emigration represented a significant long-term economic impact. The systematic targeting of intellectuals and skilled professionals created gaps in expertise that took years to fill through education and training programs. The psychological trauma experienced by survivors also affected productivity and social stability in the post-war period.

7.2 Post-Independence Economic Challenges

The newly independent Bangladesh faced the enormous task of rebuilding a war-torn economy while establishing new governmental and institutional structures. The country inherited significant economic problems from the pre-war period, including over-dependence on agriculture, limited industrial development, inadequate infrastructure, and vulnerability to natural disasters.

International assistance played a crucial role in post-war reconstruction, with various countries and international organizations providing aid for rehabilitation and development. However, the effectiveness of this assistance was limited by administrative capacity constraints, political instability, and the magnitude of reconstruction needs relative to available resources.

The economic legacy of the liberation war included both the burden of reconstruction and the opportunity to reshape economic structures freed from West Pakistani domination. The nationalization policies implemented in the immediate post-independence period reflected ideological commitments made during the liberation struggle, though their economic effectiveness proved limited.

8 Aftermath and Long-term Consequences

8.1 Political Development and Democratic Challenges

The post-independence political development of Bangladesh reflected both the democratic aspirations of the liberation movement and the practical challenges of nation-building in a war-torn society. The initial period under Sheikh Mujib's leadership saw attempts to implement the secular, democratic ideals proclaimed during the independence struggle, but these efforts were hampered by economic difficulties, administrative challenges, and political opposition.

The assassination of Sheikh Mujib and most of his family in 1975 marked a tragic end to the founding leadership and initiated a period of political instability and military rule. The subsequent alternation between civilian and military governments demonstrated the difficulty of consolidating democratic institutions in societies emerging from violent conflict.

The liberation war's legacy continues to influence Bangladeshi politics, with major political parties claiming to represent the true spirit of 1971 and accusing opponents of betraying liberation war ideals. The politicization of liberation war history has complicated efforts to achieve national reconciliation and consensus on fundamental national issues.

8.2 Regional and International Relations

The creation of Bangladesh significantly altered South Asian geopolitics, ending Pakistan's role as a potential counterweight to Indian regional dominance and creating new dynamics of cooperation and competition. The relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan remained strained for years after independence, with issues of recognition, repatriation of prisoners of war, and asset division complicating normalization efforts.

Bangladesh's relationship with India, despite crucial Indian support during the liberation war, has been complex and sometimes tense. Issues including border demarcation, water shar-

ing, trade arrangements, and the treatment of minorities have created periodic tensions between the two nations. The asymmetry in size and power between India and Bangladesh has contributed to Bangladeshi concerns about maintaining sovereignty and independence in foreign policy.

The international recognition of Bangladesh established precedents for the recognition of states created through liberation struggles supported by external intervention. The circumstances of Bangladesh's creation contributed to international law discussions about humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect, and the limits of sovereignty in cases of systematic human rights violations.

8.3 Memory, Commemoration, and Historical Legacy

The memory of the liberation war occupies a central place in Bangladeshi national consciousness, commemorated through national holidays, monuments, museums, and educational curricula. The preservation of liberation war history and the honor accorded to freedom fighters represent ongoing efforts to maintain connection with the founding ideals of independence.

However, the interpretation of liberation war history has become contested terrain, with different political groups emphasizing different aspects of the struggle to support their contemporary political positions. Debates over the role of religion in the liberation movement, the extent of foreign assistance, and the responsibility for wartime atrocities continue to generate political controversy.

The international legacy of the Bangladeshi Liberation War includes its contribution to the development of international humanitarian law, the concept of humanitarian intervention, and the documentation of genocide and crimes against humanity. The conflict has been studied as a case study in successful liberation movements, though the specific circumstances of international support and intervention limit its applicability to other situations.

9 Conclusion

The Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971 represents a complex historical phenomenon that fundamentally transformed South Asian politics while contributing to broader international developments in human rights law and humanitarian intervention principles. The conflict's success in achieving independence through a combination of internal resistance and external support demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of liberation movements in the modern international system.

The war's legacy extends far beyond the creation of Bangladesh to encompass important precedents for international response to systematic human rights violations, the role of cultural and linguistic identity in political mobilization, and the challenges of post-conflict nation-building. The systematic documentation of atrocities committed during the conflict contributed to the development of international criminal law and the concept of genocide prevention.

The economic, social, and political challenges faced by Bangladesh in the decades following independence illustrate the complexity of translating liberation struggle ideals into effective governance and development. The country's experience demonstrates both the transformative potential of successful independence movements and the ongoing difficulties of consolidating democratic institutions and promoting inclusive development in post-conflict societies.

The international dimensions of the liberation war, particularly the role of great power rivalry and humanitarian concerns in shaping external intervention, provide important insights into the dynamics of Cold War conflicts and their regional impacts. The conflict's resolution through military victory rather than negotiated settlement created both opportunities for rapid political transformation and challenges in achieving long-term reconciliation.

Contemporary relevance of the Bangladeshi Liberation War extends to ongoing discussions about humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect civilian populations, and the international community's obligations in preventing and responding to mass atrocities. The conflict's documentation of systematic sexual violence as a weapon of war contributed to international legal developments in prosecuting gender-based crimes and protecting women in armed conflict.

The liberation war's contribution to South Asian regional dynamics continues to influence contemporary international relations, with the precedent of successful secession affecting discussions about self-determination movements elsewhere in the region and beyond. The complex relationship between national liberation, international intervention, and post-conflict state-building exemplified by Bangladesh's experience remains relevant to contemporary conflicts and peacebuilding efforts.

The scholarly study of the Bangladeshi Liberation War has contributed to multiple academic disciplines, including military history, international relations, genocide studies, post-colonial studies, and development studies. The extensive documentation of the conflict through government records, participant testimonies, media coverage, and academic research provides a rich resource for understanding the dynamics of modern liberation movements and their aftermath.

In conclusion, the Bangladeshi Liberation War stands as a pivotal moment in twentieth-century history that achieved its immediate objective of independence while raising enduring questions about the relationship between sovereignty and human rights, the role of external intervention in internal conflicts, and the challenges of building democratic institutions in societies emerging from violent conflict. The war's legacy continues to influence both Bangladesh's domestic development and broader international discussions about humanitarian intervention, genocide prevention, and post-conflict reconstruction.

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