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The 1971 East Pakistan Crisis: A Critical Reassessment

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Abstract

The multi-dimensional reasons behind the dismemberment of Pakistan during the 1971 East Pakistan crisis include linguistic tensions, economic disparity, failed leadership, and various forms of political violence. This article provides an overview of Operation Searchlight, the role the Indian military played in the conflict, and the international environment in which the events took place, offering insights into Pakistan's ultimate dismemberment. It also highlights the little-studied violence that occurred against the Biharis and West Pakistani populations of East Pakistan, placing those events in their broader humanitarian context. By confronting the distorted views of history created by the dominant narrative through an investigation of the actual historical events, the final part of the article provides directions for rebuilding goodwill, creating understanding, and fostering positive bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan in the future.

Keywords: East Pakistan Crisis 1971, Bangladesh Liberation War, Operation Searchlight, Political Violence, Civil-Military Relations, Bihari Massacre, Reconciliation.

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Introduction

The creation of Pakistan in 1947 resulted from the Muslim community uniting under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah to secure a country that would be home to Muslims in South Asia. After the founding of the Muslim League in 1906 and the passing of the Pakistan Resolution in 1940, the establishment of the state took just 41 and 7 years, respectively. Pakistan was created with two parts: East Pakistan (East Bengal) and West Pakistan (Western Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Northwest Frontier Province (now KPK). But soon after the independence on 14 August 1947, after much struggle, sacrifice, suffering and the largest human migration in history, the Pakistani nation had lost all memory of who they were. Ironically, on 21 March 1948, as Quaid-e-Azam addressed an audience in Dacca about how to keep the new nation united, he actually counselled them against having a provincial identity (Nawaz, 2008, p. 77). Many Western and Indian writers had speculated about the future of Pakistan when it was created as a country and described it as a 'geographical absurdity' and 'disfigured'. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was an Indian National Congress leader who later became India's President; he stated that Pakistan would not survive in its present form for more than 25 years, a prediction that has proven true. However, it was not due to Pakistan's shape or to differences in language or culture between the country's two regions. In fact, it was the wilful ignorance of its citizens, the selfishness and insincerity of its leaders, as well as India's negative role, that led to the East Pakistan crisis and ultimate dismemberment in 1971.

The division of Pakistan in 1971 resulted from a long-standing political issue involving military action against insurgents and specifically Indian hostility towards East Pakistan. The break-up of Pakistan was one of the biggest disasters in Pakistan's history for the Muslim community in South Asia. To offer some perspective on how tragic this event really was, the Bengali people were the original group that led the movement creating Pakistan, only to launch an attack 24 years after the founding of their nation, in order to destroy the same nation, they had worked so hard to build. How could this happen? The reasons are many and complex; perhaps it all has to do with the dismal way that the Pakistani leadership handled itself. The tragedy, though ultimately a military defeat, was essentially a national politico-strategic failure at various tiers of policymaking and implementation. Who is responsible for the tragedy that has befallen Pakistan? No single individual, event, or occurrence can be held accountable for the breakup of Pakistan into two nations. A nation is not defined solely by the numbers or strength of its armed forces; it also needs a robust economic base and a stable government, which together provide national security. The separation of the east wing from the west wing was a result of multiple individuals making a variety of mistakes at various points in their history. Internal conflict within the country presented an excellent opportunity for India to pursue its own self-serving goals.

Main Causes of the East Pakistan Tragedy

The causes of the East Pakistan tragedy may vary; many people have different views of what caused this to happen in only a short period of time. Some had different views on how the government dealt with this issue since 1970. They felt that people living in East Pakistan did not receive their fair share of resources from West Pakistan. Once this is analysed in detail, it can be seen that there could have been various solutions, such as developing political skills, gaining political acceptance, and, above all, the will and desire to find common ground with each other; all of which may have helped prevent a crisis from developing. A few of the main causes are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

- **The Language Controversy**

The language dispute first surfaced in February 1948, when Hindu assembly member Dharendra Nath Dutta introduced a resolution to provide for the use of Bengali, along with Urdu, in constituent assembly proceedings (Aziz, 1974, p. 48; Matinuddin, 1994, p. 47). Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan objected to Dutta's proposal, stating that since Urdu was the cultural heritage of Muslims in India, it would be Pakistan's only national language. The Prime Minister's opinion was echoed again by Quaid-e-Azam when he addressed a group of students at Dacca University on 19 March 1948, reiterating that Urdu, and only Urdu, would serve as the lingua franca for Pakistan (Matinuddin, 1994, p. 47). This announcement did not go well with Bengalis. The history of the separation of the two wings of Pakistan is the story of how the leaders of Pakistan did not realise the role of the Bengali language in creating unity among the people of Pakistan. The division had started long before 1971. In fact, Indian intellectual Basant Chatterjee said that the Bengali language became a political weapon against Pakistan (Chatterjee, 1973). and that the language riots of 1952 had shifted politics toward provincial affairs and heightened distrust between Pakistan's eastern and western wings. The government did not appreciate how wide the gap would be between the eastern and western wings. Later, when Bangla was made a national language in 1956, it was too late.

- **The Disparity Issue**

It was widely, and in some way truly, thought that there were not enough Bengalis serving in either the civil service or security forces of Pakistan. Although the government attempted to rectify this problem, perceptions continued to prevail over reality. The other major factor contributing to the regional disparity was the economic deprivation of East Pakistan, which had been the poorest region within the larger geographical area known as Bengal before the partition of India in 1947. Prior to the partition of India, East Bengal had an agriculture-based economy, with almost all agricultural products sent to West Bengal, which was predominantly a Hindu-based industrial economy. At the time of independence from British rule (14 August 1947), East Bengal had the lowest levels of urbanisation, industrialisation, and literacy; the lowest electricity generation capacity; and the lowest per capita income. While the new government did try to improve the economic status of East Pakistan from 1947 to 1968, it could have done so with a much greater effort and at an accelerated pace. The number of East Pakistanis in the army rose by about 100% from 1947 to 1958, and by 500% by April 1968, reflecting the government's efforts (Rizvi, 2013, p. 153).

- **Governance Dynamics**

The leaders of the Bengali people were unable to accommodate other ethnic groups in their nation; instead, they fomented resentment and manipulated people's emotions. When the nine-month civil war and insurrection in East Pakistan occurred in 1971, the role of the foreign media was also important in making it look as if there was an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe, using exaggerated coverage of the pro-Indian position that was taken by several international news organisations. The Pakistani government's decision to remove foreign correspondents from Dacca (Nawaz, 2008, p. 268). would help establish an apparent and hardened antagonism towards Pakistan when the foreign media began to accept unverified reports of the atrocities committed against the civilians of Dacca (Sisson & Rose, 1990, p. 217).

- **Political Turmoil and Violence**

Following the elections in December 1970, the political situation in East Pakistan worsened amid developments in the country. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led the Awami League to a resounding win, but there were many reports of ballot stuffing or rigging done in those elections. Most people thought there would be some form of coalition government. The West Pakistan majority party would not allow the national assembly/legislature to meet after the election, thus adding fuel to the already growing political divide between East and West. He was trying to force the Awami League to share control of the government with him, since they had the majority of the votes in West Pakistan (Choudhury, 1974, p. 146). Mujibur Rahman took an extreme stance on this. The deterioration of the political situation and President Yahya Khan's postponement of the assembly meeting caused widespread resentment among the people of East Pakistan. The Awami League, with India's full backing, launched a resistance campaign, which led rebels to take charge of political and administrative duties. Resultantly, the non-Bengali Urdu-speaking Bihari community in East Pakistan were massacred in an indiscriminate manner (Saikia, 2011, p. 1). by the Mukti Bahini (the military arm of the Awami League). The large-scale immigration to India started to internationalise the situation (Khan, 1973, pp. 48–49). Colonel (retd) M.A.G. Osmany (the commander of the Mukti Bahini) and a few Awami League leaders met responsible Indian officials and were assured of full support and assistance from the Government of India (Agha, 2011, p. 166). Violent intimidation continued throughout Bangladesh against all those who were not active supporters of the Awami League party. Radio and television broadcasts from Dacca were also required to play Bangladesh's new national anthem. The Science Lab in Dacca was invaded by the protestors, who stole all the explosive chemicals. A raid on the Polytechnic Institute in Dacca was prevented by troop intervention after the mob had been dispersed (Rushbrook Williams, 1972, pp. 53–54). In a reported case of brutality committed against the Pathan people, reported by Noor Jahan, the wife of Abdur Rashid, her husband was killed during an attack on their home. While the males in her family were all executed, women were kidnapped and taken to another village where over 250 Pathan men, women, and children were Mukti's brutal murder victims. The sadistic terrorists would cut pieces of flesh from the bodies of the Pathan victims they murdered and would rub the fresh wounds with dirt until the victims either lost consciousness or died. The women who were abducted were raped every night, and those who attempted to resist were executed, and their bodies dismembered, while the words "Joi Bangla" were carved into their foreheads (Aziz, 1974, pp. 98–99).

- **Military Intervention**

To address the increasingly deteriorating law-and-order situation, the military, which at the time was only an infantry division in peacetime (10,000–12,000 personnel), initiated military operation "Searchlight" on the night of March 25/26, 1971 (Khan, 1973, p. 67). Almost all the Bengali troops and civil administration in East Pakistan rebelled against the Pakistani military and the non-Bengali civilian population, in some cases killing their families and in many other cases providing both physical and intelligence support to the Indian Army and the RAW. From March 26 to April 22, 1971, approximately 15,000 non-Bengali people were brutally massacred by Mukti Bahini in Naogaon and Santahar (Government of Pakistan, 1971, p. 25). The conditions thereafter continued to deteriorate beyond all control.

India's Role in the Crisis

India viewed the crisis in East Pakistan, following Yahya Khan's military crackdown, as the opportunity of a lifetime to divide Pakistan into two (Salik, 1978, p. 247). The Indian Border

Security Force (BSF), normally deployed to border areas, was amongst the first to jump into action by physically joining Mukti Bahini. K. F. Rustamji, the Director General of the Indian BSF, wasted no time in placing specially chosen commanders, along with their specialised commandos, at the most strategically valuable locations along the India-East Pakistan Border. He ordered Brigadier B. C. Pande of the BSF to proceed to Tripura, who immediately deployed the 104 Commando Battalion to help Mukti Bahini against the Pakistan Armed Forces by the end of March 1971. Following this initial deployment, an additional number of commandos were deployed to support any groups opposing the actions of the Pakistan Army. By early April 1971, Colonel Rampal Singh (103 Commando Battalion), Colonel Megh Singh (18 Commando Battalion), and Brigadier M. S. Chatterjee (with commando officers from Hazaribagh) had been deployed to Cooch Behar, Bongaon, and Balurghat, respectively (Chakravorty & Prasad, 1992, p. 803). At this time, India was publicly denying any claim of involvement in matters of Pakistan's domestic concerns, which was untrue.

In December 1971, the Times reported that at least or most of the Mukti Bahini comprised Indian soldiers and not simply the Bengali rebels they were fighting alongside. Morarji Desai, former Indian Prime Minister, with Oriana Fallaci, stated that by the end of the operation in 1971, approximately 5000 Indian soldiers disguised as members of Mukti Bahini had been transported to East Pakistan over the course of the year. Many of these soldiers died in the conflict (Chowdhury, 1996, p. 17). Furthermore, because of the (Indian orchestrated) hijacking of the Indian aircraft Ganga, which was later destroyed at Lahore Airport, the Indian government prohibited the Pakistani government from using Indian airspace for commercial airline flights. This policy forced the Pakistanis to take an extended route to Dacca by way of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and added to the numerous problems associated with the movement of troops, civilians, and logistical support to East Pakistan. Ceylon provided significant assistance to the Pakistani military during a time of crisis. The Research & Analysis Wing (RAW), an Indian intelligence agency, was established in 1968 to accomplish a one-time strategic goal of dividing Pakistan. However, RAW's activities in the East Pakistan crisis were not limited to its initial purpose of partitioning the country. RAW played a more extensive, covert role than originally conceived and was also publicly engaged in supporting and aiding the Mukti Bahini for insurgency in East Pakistan (Jacob, 1997, p. 91). As detailed above, Indian operatives and officials close to the government had a strong influence on the formation of the Mukti Bahini as well as on the eventual proclamation of independence for the new state of Bangladesh.

Global Conditions

The global conditions during the 1971 crisis did not work in Pakistan's favour. It had become a US ally and member of SEATO and CENTO since 1954. It had been assured of US support in the event of an attack by another country. Pakistan was therefore excessively confident (or encouraged) that US military forces and support would prevent it from disintegration. The United States, however, pursued a very careful approach toward military assistance to Pakistan; thus, the much-trumpeted and expected US Navy Seventh Fleet never reached East Pakistan. Before and during the war, the USSR provided India substantial support, as described in the treaty signed by both countries on 9 August 1971 regarding peace, friendship, and cooperation. As part of its support during the hostilities, the Soviet Union supplied military hardware to India and participated prominently in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), vetoing all resolutions favouring India. The People's Republic of China supported Pakistan during the crisis, though that support was mostly limited to moral and diplomatic support (Singh, 1981, p. 203). The UK openly helped India and cut off economic assistance to Pakistan on 23 June 1971, while also permitting the

Government of Bangladesh in exile to establish a High Commission in London beginning in September 1971 (K. K. Aziz, 2003, p. 162). Pakistan had counted on the support of other Islamic nations over the years. While they offered near-unanimous support for Pakistan during the conflict, they collectively had a very small amount of actual military and financial aid to provide to Pakistan over the course of their support.

The Course and Conduct of the 1971 War

India initiated an undeclared but open war on 21 November 1971 (Eid-ul-Fitr day in Pakistan) by crossing the international border and attacking East Pakistan with overwhelming numerical superiority in air, land and sea. The misconception that the India-Pakistan war of 1971 commenced on 3 December 1971 is because it was the day the hostilities broke out in the western theatre. The Pakistan Army was under-strength and thinly spread along the complex borders of East Pakistan, defending BOPs (Border Outposts) with minimal personnel. They had orders to hold every inch of Pakistan's territory. This greatly hindered their ability to defend against an invasion and enabled the Indian Army, with full support from the Mukti Bahini, to bypass Pakistani Army defences with ease. When possible, the Indian Army sought to bypass Pakistani Army units and avoid direct confrontations. Pakistani Army units generally defended the borders effectively and inflicted significant losses on the Indian Army. Due to the actions of the Pakistani Army, the Indian Army was unable to seize any significant position from the Pakistani Army until the Pakistani Army abandoned it. Several isolated positions continued to be held by Pakistani troops, even after 16 December 1971, when the war officially ended.

The Surrender

On 14 December 1971, President Yahya Khan delivered a message to East Pakistan's political leaders regarding their future. Citing the rough conditions in East Pakistan and the repeated vetoes of the United Nations by the Soviet Union, Yahya Khan asked the leadership to stop fighting to prevent further bloodshed. The message was received by the Governor and military commander of East Pakistan in Dacca on the same day at about 15:30 hours. The President thanked the Pakistan Army for fighting under very poor conditions and expressed pride in Pakistan's resistance. He also stated that every effort had been made at the highest level to create a workable political or diplomatic solution. However, the President concluded that, under present conditions, it would not be possible to continue the fight indefinitely, and that there would be no military advantage in continuing; only more lives lost and destruction caused. Therefore, the Governor and Military Commanders were directed to take the necessary action to end the fighting and protect all Pakistani armed forces members, citizens from West Pakistan and all remaining loyal citizens from East Pakistan. Further, the President stated that the United Nations had requested India to stop fighting immediately (Matinuddin, 1994, p. 505).

On 15 December 1971, a final message was sent from GHQ to Dacca at 11:50 a.m. (Pakistan time) by the Army's Chief of Staff to General Niazi concerning Niazi's reply to the President and the Indian Army Chief of Staff's statement on the radio. It said that the Indian military leaders' terms should be accepted because they coincided with the demands of the Eastern Command but also stated that it was only a local military decision and not a political outcome that affected the big picture of the situation (Agha, 2025, p. 350). General Niazi accepted this final command from his superior command and signed the documents that confirmed his surrender to the Indian Army on 16 December 1971, ending the dream of a united Pakistan for all time. Unfortunately, the political crisis that engulfed the military of Pakistan as a result of an undesirable situation contributed to the disintegration of Pakistan as a country. Had the Pakistani leadership reacted more maturely

and responsibly, placing national interests above their selfish or regional agenda, the outcome would have been different. There was tremendous Indian intervention that supported Indian evil designs to prevent an amicable resolution of the situation through the means of brainwashing the Bengali-speaking people of East Pakistan.

The UN Security Council met numerous times to discuss the situation and attempted to pass several resolutions, but was unsuccessful in reaching a consensus due to repeated vetoes by the USSR and Pakistan's diplomatic failure to manage the situation at the UN. Had the Security Council taken decisive action and approved one of the many resolutions tabled by members of the Security Council, the violence and suffering, and subsequent loss of Pakistani soldiers and the humiliation of capitulation to India could have been averted. Severe. The Security Council's failure to act, coupled with Pakistan's inability to manage relations with the international community through diplomacy, led to a likely ceasefire becoming a surrender. Due to this failure to reach a ceasefire, the Government of Pakistan had no choice but to order Pakistan's troops located in East Pakistan to accept India's offer of capitulation to prevent further loss of innocent lives. The Pakistan Armed Forces had been fighting an overwhelmingly superior enemy for nine months, as they could only use conventional means. They did this with great courage to maintain Pakistan's integrity. Not only did the Pakistan Army display bravery during this conflict, but the Air Force and Navy also demonstrated tremendous courage in defending Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Historiographically Neglected Massacre

In 1971, there was a series of attacks against the Bihari people in Dacca and East Pakistan — now Bangladesh. The attacks against the Biharis were carried out in two phases: the first phase occurred in March 1971, and the second came after Dacca fell to the Indian Army. While many of those attacked were Biharis, others included West Pakistani citizens; a number of Bengalis, who supported the Pakistan State, many of whom belonged to Al-Badar and Al-Shams. The attacks were motivated not by a belief that Biharis and West Pakistani people were "foreigners"; rather, the Mukti Bahini believed that Biharis and West Pakistanis were "traitors" because they supported the Pakistani government in East Pakistan. After the fall of Dacca, the Mukti Bahini killed Biharis and West Pakistanis, along with their family members. The killings were witnessed by both Indian and Mukti Bahini troops, as well as by people at large. While the Indian Army claimed to guarantee the safety of unarmed civilians, including Biharis and West Pakistanis, it was unable to provide protection to them (Khan, 1973, p. 191). This mass murder remains unexamined and neglected even after 55 years of happening. As a result of being a member of the minority community or simply being of a different ethnicity, children suffered the same fate as adults. The result was a systematic attempt to exterminate and eliminate Biharis, West Pakistanis, and their children from the territory of East Pakistan. Many of the survivors of these horrific and unspeakable crimes are now being forced to live in filthy, unsanitary conditions in refugee camps and orphanages in Bangladesh.

Throughout the first half of 1972, Dacca Jail was filled with numerous prisoners (referred to as collaborators), officially registered at 14,000, while its maximum allowed capacity was only 1966 persons. According to some observers, there were many instances of brutality which surpassed even the Nazis of the Hitler regime (Hussain, 1999, pp. 39, 45). This included 50,000 plus men, women, and children, all of whom were subjected to imprisonment. Additionally, militants belonging to Mukti Bahini often conducted executions without trial when removing prisoners from their place of captivity. Additionally, numerous prominent Bengali personalities went missing overnight (Rahman, 1978, pp. 22, 25–26). To justify such acts, a special legislation was created

and passed through special government orders titled ‘The Bangladesh National Liberation Struggle Order 1973’. To accomplish this, an indemnity and amnesty order prohibiting any legal action against individuals accused of acts associated with or related to the struggle for independence or order between 1 March and 16 December 1971 could be issued. The order provided a sweeping legal indemnity by stipulating that no suit, prosecution, or other legal proceeding would be maintainable in any court against any individual for actions undertaken between 1 March 1971 and 16 December 1971 in connection with the struggle for national liberation, or for acts related to the maintenance or restoration of order up to 28 February 1972. This provision effectively shielded persons from judicial accountability for conduct during the conflict period and its immediate aftermath, thereby institutionalising legal protection for actions carried out within the specified timeframe (Bangladesh Collaborators Order, 1972).

Several photographs that are available on the web, showing massacres in East Pakistan in 1971, are actually of Bihari people, who were targeted by the Mukti Bahini and Indian agents, to malign the Armed Forces of Pakistan. In actuality, the Mukti Bahini, RAW agents, Indian saboteurs and other radical elements of society were responsible for perpetrating a true genocide. A great deal of the horrifying and gruesome evidence can be found through the work of renowned scholar Qutubuddin Aziz, through his interviews with 173 eyewitnesses (Aziz, 1974, pp. 98–99). On 19 December 1971, just three days after Bangladesh was born, there were thousands of Indian military personnel in Dacca (Dhaka), when the Mukti Bahini militants operating under Kader Siddique, in the sight of thousands of witnesses and international media, bayoneted the Biharis to death. Kader Siddique himself bayoneted three prisoners. Large numbers of members of the international media were in the immediate vicinity of this act, recording photographs and video of the event. The photographs were published by Time Magazine on 6 January 1972 (Rahman, 1978, p. 28; Jacob, 1997, p. 146; Khan, 1973, p. 191).

On 19 December 1971, the Mukti Bahini abducted Dr Syed Sajjad Hussain (Vice-Chancellor of Dacca University) and Dr Hasan Zaman from their homes. They were stabbed repeatedly before being abandoned at the side of the road, dying. Dr Sajjad received treatment from a passerby and was taken to a hospital to receive medical assistance. Dr Sajjad survived but, as a result of his injuries, could never regain full health. Dr Hasan Zaman also survived his ordeal (Hussain, 1999, pp. 9–10). Amjad Ali, a former Muslim League member, was removed from the Dargah of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet city and brutally murdered. His body was dismembered and left to decompose for multiple days. Maulvi Farid (Vice-President of the Pakistan Democratic Party) was captured; his flesh was mutilated by blades with salt rubbed into the broken flesh before he was murdered and his body desecrated. Professor Tariqullah (Head of the Bengali Department at Choumuhari College in Naokhali), was captured, tortured and murdered. Maulana Pir Dewan Ali (Dacca) was captured, publicly flogged, and thrown into the river with multiple broken bones after he was handcuffed and stones shackled to his body so that he would drown (Chowdhury, 1996, p. 41).

The liberators killed many human beings through their violent actions and caused irreversible damage to countless others. These tyrants tortured many people by way of lynching, whipping, stripping, mutilating, cutting off, and otherwise ruthlessly killing (Chowdhury, 1996, pp. 38, 40). In addition, thousands of loyal Bengali and Bihari civilians were falsely accused of impeding upon the liberators’ war activities and subsequently were arrested. Some were fortunate enough to be imprisoned, while others were executed upon capture through mass executions or public lynching (Hussain, 1995, p. 24). Up until this time, the Dacca jail had never housed so many intellectuals; there were five individuals with PhDs, as well as numerous barristers, high court judges, civil service personnel, doctors, and lawyers (Hussain, 1999, p. 72). Following the capitulation of the

Pakistani military on 16 December 1971, the Mukti Bahini went on a rampage against the non-Bengali inhabitants of East Pakistan. "About two weeks after the capitulation by the Pakistani military, the Mukti Bahini continued to indiscriminately slaughter any non-Bengali person found," stated Oriana Fallaci and Gianfranco Moroldo, renowned Italian interviewers. The level of violence carried out by the Mukti Bahini became so severe that the Indian military had to kill many of them after the surrender to make them afraid of performing any more acts of violence (Matinuddin, 1994, p. 238).

Myths versus Reality

Sadly, there are many myths about this tragedy which have gone unchallenged by Pakistan, while the rest of the world has accepted them as truth. The internet is full of this perspective all over the place, continually feeding into everyone's mind. Myths are that there were 3 million Bengalis killed, 200,000 women dishonoured, and 93,000 prisoners of war from the armed forces. All of these myths have been disproved and found to be fictional through the research of numerous well-known authors, such as William Rushbrook (Rushbrook Williams, 1972), Afrasiab (Afrasiab, 2015), Abdul Mumin Chowdhury (Chowdhury, 1996), Dr Junaid Ahmad (Ahmad, 2016, p. 9), Ikram Sehgal, Bettina Robotka (Sehgal & Robotka, 2020, p. 222), and Sarmila Bose (a Bengali Hindu professor), among others (Bose, 2011, p. 177). Renowned researcher Yasmin Saikia states that the West Pakistani soldiers were not monstrous and barbaric as depicted in the media, but rather soldiers who were unprepared for a civil conflict that they had been engaged in and thus had difficulty maintaining humanitarian values during this time (Saikia, 2011). All reports of 3 million Bengalis being killed originated with the Soviet newspaper Pravda (Ahmad, 2016, p. 258) and were perpetuated by the rhetoric of the Awami League leadership, a common propaganda tool used to accrue political advantages.

According to Peter Gill, the notion that 3 million people were murdered is exaggerated (Oja, 1973), and 3 million is a woefully and wildly exaggerated figure for the number of Bengalis murdered in the ten months of suffering (Gill, 1973). Assuming simple mathematics, 11,320 people were killed every day for 265 days (from 26 March to 15 December 1971), and 754 women were raped every day, by a military force of approximately 45,000 troops, spread the length and breadth of East Pakistan, who were engaged in fierce battle with both the Indian Army and Mukti Bahini. This does not seem to be humanly possible and sounds fictional. Following the formation of Bangladesh, the government of Bangladesh offered 2,000 Taka (Bangladeshi currency) for every instance of confirmed murder (Chowdhury, 1996, p. 24), but the numbers were small (not enough to support the figures), and the identities of the participants were not verified. Colonel Akbar Hussain, a decorated Mukti Jodha and cabinet member (serving under both General Zia-ur-Rahman and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia), challenged these numbers in the National Assembly of Bangladesh in 1993. In the book *Dead Reckoning*, Sarmila Bose quotes Bangladeshi witnesses and participants in the events of 1971 as stating that women in East Pakistan were not harmed by the Pakistani Military, other than being killed as a result of crossfire (Bose, 2007).

The claim that there were 93,000 Pakistani soldiers held as prisoners of war is also questionable. The East Bengal garrisons had always been protected by one division of about 13,000-15,000 troops. According to General Niazi, his active force was about 34,000. The deteriorating law-and-order conditions and the perception of a threat from India led to the dispatch of two additional divisions, or about 24,000 troops, and substantial reinforcements to the naval and air forces to East Pakistan. As a result, there were approximately 58,000 total troops in East Pakistan, of which a

number of persons were family members of Biharis and West Pakistanis who were resident in East Pakistan and were treated brutally and forced to endure filthy prisoner of war camps.

Conclusion

Regardless of the various factors and conditions leading up to, and the aftermath of, the fracture of Pakistan after 24 years of its formation, the reality of the nation's division remains an everlasting stain on the fabric of Pakistan. Various segments of Pakistani society and leadership collectively failed to prevent the tragedy. No single segment of society – whether it was the military, political parties, leadership, or government – bears sole responsibility for this horrific event. Numerous lessons have been learned; the goal should be not to repeat them. The most important lesson to be drawn from this is to ensure that the ideological and physical integrity of the homeland is preserved through national cohesion that involves all segments of the population. Political issues must be resolved through the political process, in the best interests of the whole nation, and must never reach a point of no return. The use of military force, if necessary, should be grounded in political consensus and the will of the people (Pakistan's war on terrorism is an example). The national interests, equitable access to justice, fair treatment, and the rule of law must always take precedence over the aforementioned factors.

The events leading to Bangladesh's independence warrant consideration of their impact on both nations and the future of their relationship. Should we continue to mourn the division of East and West Pakistan? Can we move towards a more positive and promising future together? Formerly part of Pakistan, Bangladesh is a sovereign state in today's international order. Bangladesh faces many of the same issues that challenge Pakistan (e.g., poverty, health care, and infrastructure development), but it also has to contend with an aggressive neighbour that seeks dominance over smaller, less powerful neighbours. The only way for both Bangladesh and Pakistan to survive is to move beyond their painful and resentful past and create a more harmonious future grounded in ideals of equality, mutual respect, forgiveness, and peaceful collaboration. The ways in which South Africa has pursued truth and reconciliation can serve as models for the establishment of a formal process to allow such reconciliation (acknowledgement) to take place between Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as provide a framework for improved bilateral relations in the form of improved intergovernmental and inter-people relationships and economic, social, defence and cultural co-operation. In fact, all countries in South Asia share the need for co-operation to oppose India's hegemonic aspirations and Hindutva-oriented policy decisions. Ultimately, the evolution of societies into progressive nations requires peaceful coexistence and collective efforts to combat those forces of evil that seek to subvert peace.

Conflict of Interest

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