

## SPECIAL FEATURE

The oppression of the West Pakistanis, culminating in the heinous atrocities of Operation Searchlight, proved to be too much and the whole countryside erupted in flames. The breakout of war signalled the complete failure of the "Two nation theory" left by the British during the partition of India – even though East and West were united on the basis of religion, they were too divided linguistically, economically, culturally and historically.

The seat of administrative power was always in West Pakistan and the people of East Pakistan were historically taken advantage of due to this. This was most evidently seen in 1952 when the government of West Pakistan tried to enforce Urdu as the national language of Pakistan, despite the majority of people of East Pakistan not speaking it.

The military government also failed to acknowledge the results of the election of the previous year, where Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League won a majority in the elections and were not allowed to form the government.

On the night of 25 March 1971, the West Pakistan establishment launched a military operation on the growing nationalist movement in East Pakistan – what made it particularly bloody was the indiscriminate nature of its focus.

It targeted civilians, students, academics, and military personnel, in an effort to instil authority through terror. Historical records show that President Yahya Khan had said to his officers that "kill 3 million of them and we will have the rest eating out of our hands."

The significance of this day of Independence cannot be underestimated. It burns in the hearts and minds of both the young and the old, both in Bangladesh and throughout the world.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had urged his people to turn every house into a fort of resistance and he closed his speech with the words "Our struggle is for our freedom, our struggle is the struggle for independence."

These words carved out our national identity and galvanised the Bengali people to fight for their freedom, which is the birth right of every human being; to be denied of which great injustice.

The 26th of March marks the day when the entire nation denounced all injustices and the discriminations that had previously held them back. It is the beginning of the Liberation War of 1971 that gave us our identities as a Bangladeshis.

"Began the long nine months of arduous struggle when the country witnessed unprecedented genocide and horrendous sexual violence against women. Nevertheless the adamant Bangalis refused to give in. They rose all united and fearless, engaged in the War of Liberation. They shed blood, they shed tears but they remained resilient. At last as the Pakistani forces in occupation in Bangladesh surrendered to the joint command of the Bangladesh and Indian Forces, a new day was written into the pages of history."

December 16 is the outcome of the united resolve of the Bangladeshi people, each of whom through their own ways of participation fought the war that took three million lives and left a number of civilians displaced. The series of events that started from 7 March ended with the surrender of Pakistani forces.

It records the moment of delivery in freedom, dignity and patriotism of a new hope, the sovereign Bangladesh - the first Bengali republic.

The victory written in letters of gold are not just the sacrifices of the regular army but also of the peasants, students, workers and even the common men and women who brilliantly shattered any illusion of vanity that the Pakistani Army held over themselves.

It is the day of rejoicing and celebrating the end of the biggest nightmare of this nation. Even with the loss of countless martyrs whom we mourn each and every second, our hearts are not heavy as their lives didn't end in vain. Even within the silent grief and terrible loss, the 16th of December encapsulates the euphoria and the glory of our dreams that came true, the dream to free ourselves and our beloved Bangladesh.

By Mormee Mahtab  
Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad

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