



(1) Bangladesh Mukti Fauz members getting training. May 8, 1971 (2) Bangladeshi refugees in India. UNHCR/WHO/D.Henrioud (3) Freedom fighters celebrating independence in Dohar, Dhaka, in 1971. Photo by Anwar Hossain. Courtesy of the Anwar Hossain Foundation.

Remembering 1971

War is never a good thing; but if there must be a war that that is remembered across the subcontinent, it should have been the 1971 war. Victory was unequivocally one of Bangladesh's and India's finest moments, and (this is important) not just – perhaps, not even primarily – for the military victory.

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Indians in general are by and large unabashedly proud of India's role in, and contribution to Bangladesh's Independence, which came about at the end of 1971.

But while embracing that pride, Indians should be conscious that the horrors and tragedies of 1971 are essentially owned by Bangladesh. And the inspiring victory, which came about on the 16th of December, fifty-two years ago, was a joint victory. It is fitting that the Instrument of Surrender signed by Lt Gen AAK Niazi on that date specifically records that the surrender of Pakistani armed forces was to “Indian and BANGLADESH forces” (the capitalisation, and the rendition of Bangladesh as two words, are both in the original).

The early part of the year 1971 saw the beginnings of a new level of horrors in the subcontinent. Yet, some aspects are in danger of being forgotten today. Fifty-two years, at the risk of saying something obvious, is a long time in human terms, and human memories focus on the short term. Perhaps that is essential for survival. But it should trouble those of us who remember, both in Bangladesh and in India, that so much about what happened in Bangladesh, starting in



The surrender ceremony on December 16, 1971, at Race Course Maidan in Dhaka. PHOTO : RAGHU RAJ

wrong side as it could have been.

This, the fundamental ethical dimension of Bangladesh War of Independence, is an aspect of the war which has received surprisingly little coverage in India, even during Swarnim Vijay Varsh events that the Government of India conducted two years ago to mark the fiftieth anniversary. The 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence, for all the horrors and cruelties that are inseparable from war, counts as one of the world's last ‘Just Wars’. This is the consensus of scholars of ethics and international jurisprudence even beyond India and Bangladesh, such as Michael Walzer and Nicholas Wheeler. Their unambiguous judgement, as well as those of some lesser-known Bangladeshi and Indian writers, are a strong justification of the rightness of Bangladesh's cause and India's involvement, and should be better known and more widely publicised.

Among other markers of the rightness of that deliriously happy 16th of December in Dacca, I cannot resist pointing to the rollicking religious diversity of the Indian armed forces, exemplified in the names of the men at the spearpoint of the military success. They counted amongst themselves names such as Gupta, Naqvi, Panag, Lazarus, Shah, Ghandi, Jacob ... names which represent Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Parsis, and even an Indian Jew. So many (although in that seemingly more innocent time, who was even counting?) religions were represented by the men in uniforms who helped bring about this happy denouement of 16th December 1971.

in what was still being called East Pakistan. There were grainy black-and-white photographs of streams of refugees in the newspapers, and occasional equally grainy footage in Films Division's *Indian News Review* newsreels. Those newsreels invariably preceded the main feature film in Indian cinema theatres at the time (often to audible groans from the audience, and just slipping-out-for-a-cigarette whispers, between friends). It was clear even to the schoolboys that my age-mates and I were, then, that terrible things were being done just over our Eastern borders. For Bangladeshis, of course, the picture was not in the least grainy. They saw all those same horrors in living colour and three dimensions.

Yet, there was only the most marginal pressure from other countries and international agencies, to rein in Pakistan.

During the period from March 1971 until the end of that year, as a direct result of Pakistani military brutalities in East Pakistan, India took in over ten million refugees. Let that number sink in – it was then, and remains, for all the dreadful humanitarian crises that have taken place in other parts of the world, the largest migration of distressed people since the grim records set during the Second World War. It was, in numeric terms, larger than the number of refugees which accompanied Partition. [It should perhaps be clarified: The total number of people who crossed between India and Pakistan during Partition is higher, at over fourteen million, but

that number includes many *voluntary* migrations. *Refugees*, that is, involuntarily displaced persons, at the time of Partition numbered around eight million.]

In a very real sense, everyone in India at the time chipped in to support Bangladeshi refugees, through the five-paisa refugee surcharge levied on all postage. This burden fell disproportionately on the poorest Indians, the ones who used the postal system most, and they bore it with little complaint. Compassion and sympathy among the people of India, for the travails of the people of Bangladesh, was widespread, heartfelt and genuine. There was hardly any adverse reaction at the time.

In numeric terms, the number of killings and systematic depredations carried out by the Pakistan Army, while contested, are (even at the lower end of the range in debates) worse than what is usually described as the

and created the modern nation of Bangladesh. And more importantly than was perhaps realised at the time, India withdrew all her military forces from the new country in record time; in a period measurable in weeks. This is so unlike the aftermaths of many Western countries' purely military successes in the last century or so, and the subcontinent is better for it.

These accomplishments, going well beyond the military success, are the true measure of the rightness of Bangladesh's and India's joint cause; and the larger reason 1971 is so respected, at least among people who know, in the rest of the world.

Looking back after fifty years, as Indian writer Bapa Rao has said, it was as grand a moment to be Indian – or indeed Bangladeshi – as any in living memory. Good had triumphed over a considerable line-up of evil, as well as evil *realpolitik*. And that triumph was accomplished entirely by the people of the subcontinent themselves. We did not have to call on the UN, or former colonial powers, or the US Marines, or any other Global Policeman, as saviours. It is on a foundation of such shining successes that optimism about the rightness and potential of India and Bangladesh should be built.

So let us, as far as possible without rancour, remember this victory, and the Bangladeshis and Indians who died for it. And I hope Bangladesh and India will always see themselves as allies in their continuing efforts to develop our countries and uplift our people.

Above all (I am repeating myself, but this is important, to give this war its proper place), there was utter confidence, not just among the Bangladeshis, for whom it was beyond the shadow of any doubt, but even among Indians who know about this war, that it was a just war. Bangladesh and India were on the side of good, and fought against unequivocally identified evil. This was a fundamental point, not questioned by anyone (except perhaps the oblivious offices of Yahya Khan and Richard Nixon).

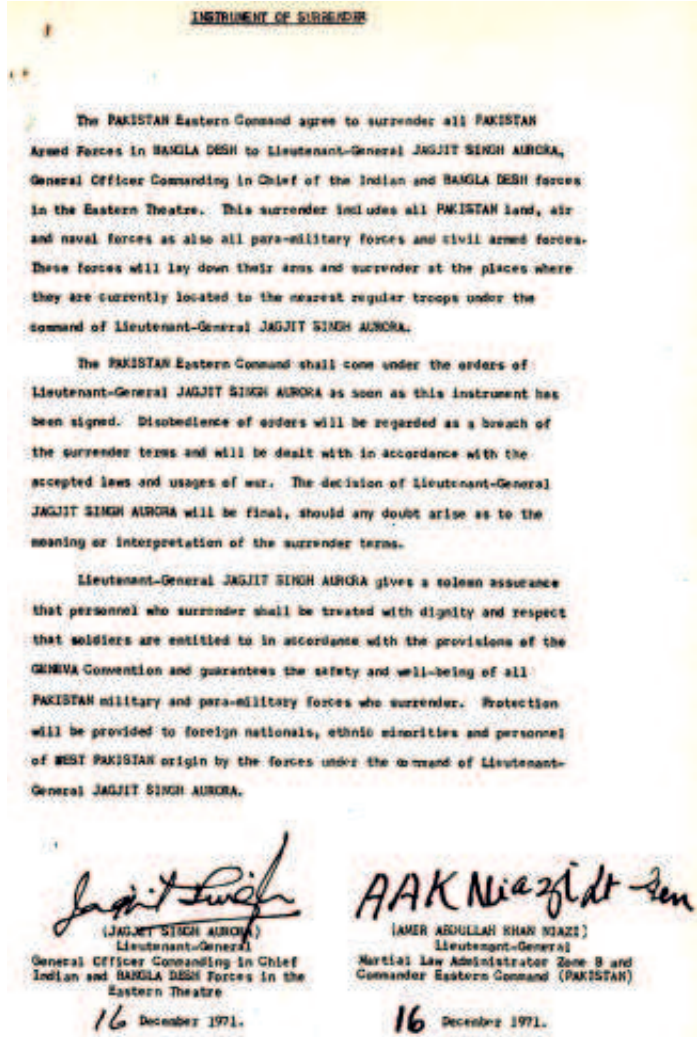
At that time, Bangladesh and India were, it is now clear, on the right side of history, a point that the UN at the time seemed utterly blind to. By contrast, the Nixon-era United States, influenced at the time by its amoral then-National Security Adviser, later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who passed away just in November this year, was as completely on the

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Rwanda genocide.

These unpleasant essentials should never be forgotten. As I have written elsewhere, war is never a good thing; but if there must be a war that that is remembered across the subcontinent, it should have been the 1971 war. Victory was unequivocally one of Bangladesh's and India's finest moments, and (this is important) not just – perhaps, not even primarily – for the military victory.

It was an overwhelming military victory, true; but the military victory was only an enabler for much more. The Bangladesh War of Independence put a stop to humanitarian crimes on a truly massive scale. (And is it too much to suggest it still has some lessons for the region today, as we consider the plight of the Rohingya in Burma?) It changed the world map,



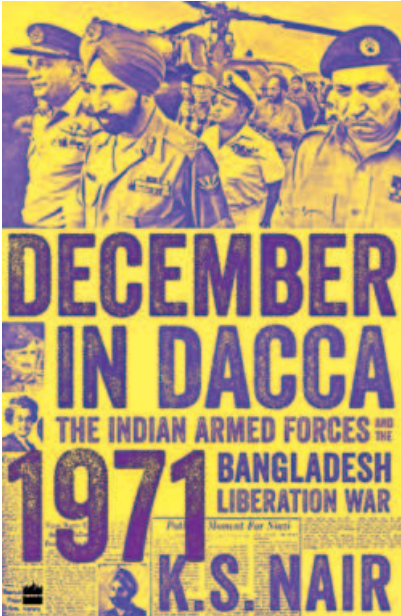
Instrument of Surrender

March 1971, seems to be unfamiliar to the younger generation.

The people of Bangladesh, of course, saw the events that led to the war up close and personal, in all its appalling detail. Starting with the crackdown on 25 March that year, many of the atrocities they suffered were perpetrated in clear, public view.

To us in India the horrors were, at least at the start, one step removed. As with the Allied involvement in World War II, at the start of the fighting it was not entirely clear how much evil had been done on the other side.

But there was some foreshadowing. For months before the Indian armed forces were formally involved, from late March of that year onwards, there had been harrowing stories on All India Radio of atrocities being committed



- As I said at the start, I am an Indian who is proud of India's contribution to Bangladesh's independence. And today, I am honoured to recall the Bangladesh War of Independence for a Bangladeshi publication.
- In the end, the Bangladesh War of Independence was a necessary and essential war, for all the unimaginable costs paid, mostly by Bangladeshis. That, rather than (or in addition to) the military success, should be the ultimate justification for the Bangladesh War of Independence, that fateful year.
- The key messages to take away, again as I have written previously, remain:
- 1 The 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence was a just and necessary war;
 - 2 It was as much so as any war that has been idealised as a “good” or justifiable war - including the Second World War;
 - 3 The countries usually described as “the Western democracies” were as completely in the wrong on the 1971 war as it was possible to be;
 - 4 Bangladesh and India were in the right, on the side of the angels, and accomplished a fairy-tale victory.
- To which I would only add, we in Bangladesh and India need to remember, and consciously work to live up to, the factors which made that war a just war, beyond the fact of a victory. We need to hold ourselves to the high humanitarian and ethical standards which make it so special a victory.
- We can; we should; and we must. Joy Bangla, and Jai Hind.
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