



The history we walked past

The BSF–Mukti Bahini collaboration that shaped Bangladesh's birth



Bangladesh Liberation War heroes in Chittagong after the war (left to right): Ashoke Gupta, Captain Mahfuzur, Captain Enamul Haque, Major Mir Saukat Ali, Captain Ali (P. K. Ghosh), and Major Rafiqul Islam.

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For 12 years, I passed by a dusty, red building on what is now called Suhrawardy Avenue in Calcutta (before it became Kolkata) and never noticed it. A colonial-era building standing next to Lady Brabourne College, it was not a local landmark. It would be years later that I chanced upon its historical and cultural significance during research on a freedom struggle that changed the map of South Asia forever.

Those 12 years were spent at my alma mater, Don Bosco Park Circus, barely half a kilometre from that red building. A fine institution, it taught us history as per the curriculum. But there was nothing on South Asia's only liberation movement based on language and culture.

The building once housed the Pakistan High Commission. Following a carefully orchestrated move, it became the first diplomatic mission of the 'Bangla Desh' government within three weeks of the Liberation War beginning. It stands slightly unkempt now, but it is a symbol of great courage, will,

nine-month-long Liberation War. The findings of my research are available in the public domain in the book titled *India's Secret War*, published by Penguin Random House India in 2023.

Here is a gist: it is a story of many firsts for both South Asia and the world. Among them is the first-ever collaboration between Bangladesh and India, which lasted for the nine long months until Liberation. The protagonists of my book are the officers and personnel of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), who worked alongside the Mukti Bahini. They jointly carried out covert missions deep inside East Pakistan, sabotaged the Pakistan Army, and facilitated several key political events, such as the swearing in of the Mujibnagar government.

The BSF were India's first responders to the genocide unfolding next door. Their role was different from that of the Indian Armed Forces, which joined the fray later. Back then, the BSF symbolised safety and security for the millions of Bengalis fleeing murder and rape in East Pakistan.

The Indian press has covered the book widely and mentioned the role of P.K. Ghosh, known to the Mukti Bahini as Captain Ali. Major (and later President of Bangladesh) Ziaur Rahman had given him this name. Ghosh, then an assistant commandant with the BSF, was posted in southern Tripura. He worked closely with several well-known war heroes such as Major Shawkat Ali, Captain Rafiqul Islam, Major Parvez Musharraf, and others.

Ghosh's role began on the morning of March 26, 1971, when he helped half a section of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), led by Havildar Nooruddin, to liberate a small hamlet. A section of Pakistan Army soldiers had been positioned there to guard the Subhapur Bridge on the River Feni. Nooruddin and the five EPR personnel took out some of the Pakistani soldiers, and an angry mob of villagers finished off the rest following their arrest.

The Subhapur Bridge lay on the trunk road connecting Chittagong to Comilla and Dhaka. Later, Ghosh, along with a team of commandos and the Mukti Bahini, would blow up the bridge (and several others) to obstruct the Pakistan Army. The joint Indian and Bangladeshi forces lost the bridge to the Pakistan Army in May 1971, but only after holding it for 21 days against a full battalion of Pakistani troops.

The media in India loved and lapped up the stories of covert operations, demolitions, and the bravado of Ghosh

and other officers like him in my book. Equally important, however, are the stories that did not receive enough coverage—those describing daily life at the border, where the Mukti Bahini camped and where refugees first stayed when they set foot in India.

One of the chapters is about P.K. Halder, who was then serving as a sub-inspector with the BSF and was posted close to the border where it runs between Petrapole and Benapole. This story is told from the point of view of an ordinary young man whose family migrated from East Bengal a few years after Partition. He grew up in West Bengal, where his family built a new life away from their ancestral home.

Halder joined the BSF for the pay cheque and found himself leading a platoon of border sentries. When the Liberation War started, Halder was one of the young men leading small operations jointly conducted by the Mukti Bahini and the BSF in civvies.

BSF personnel and officers wore civilian clothing and crossed the border along with Mukti Bahini guerrilla fighters. They donned lungis with primed grenades tucked into their waistbands and slung gamchas around their shoulders, which concealed carbine pistols.

Such small operations are often overlooked in the grand narratives of dogfights in the sky, the destruction of American tanks, and airdrops. To me, these seemingly smaller stories provide granular insight into how the Mukti Bahini kept pressure on the Pakistan Army.

The Mukti Joddhas made do with whatever weapons and tools they had available. They used microphones and speakers to draw soldiers out from the safety of their camps and then shot at them. They conducted ambushes on military parties until it became difficult for the Pakistan Army to move in smaller formations, especially at night.

In his book on the war, Lt Gen. Niazi speaks of how his soldiers were no match for guerrilla fighters during the monsoon. The Pakistan Army soldiers were not accustomed to incessant rain and the mushy terrain, he wrote. What he does not admit is that by the time the monsoon arrived, the Mukti Joddhas were in good fighting form. Cooks, tailors, farmers, students, and engineers had all undergone training and took on both razakars and soldiers of the regular army.

Some military researchers have concluded that the success of the Mukti Bahini was responsible for the

deployment of razakars at the border, while Pakistan Army soldiers remained in the safety of their camps. Later on, the Mukti Bahini and the BSF also targeted such camps of the regular army with guns and mortars in operations that are usually the function of regular armies.

Halder's point of view showed me life at the BSF camp and at the Mukti Bahini camp, adjacent to it. Mukti Joddhas were issued passes that allowed transit across the India–East Pakistan border to gather intelligence, ferry arms and ammunition, and conduct guerrilla missions. I found some of these items, such as the identity cards and passes they used, displayed at the Muktijuddha Jadugor (Liberation War Museum) in Dhaka.

The largest liberated zone in East Pakistan during the Liberation War was in Tangail, under the control of the Kaderia Bahini, led by Kader Siddiqui. His militia consisted entirely of guerrilla fighters, and he entrusted a few of them with carrying messages to and from an Indian Army brigadier operating out of Meghalaya. They carried arms and ammunition back to Tangail. This was to become one of the most important strategic partnerships of the Liberation War.

This channel facilitated the Tangail Airdrop, which eventually led to the surrender of Dhaka. Indian paratroopers were airdropped into Tangail, which had been secured by the Kaderia Bahini. These forces, together with a company of BSF personnel, then fought their way towards Dhaka and surrounded the city.

Calcutta was home to the Mujibnagar government, and I based myself in my hometown after many years while researching the book. There are buildings in the city that house secrets from the Liberation War. The Swadhin Bangla Bazaar Kendra came to the city much later, after fleeing Chittagong.

a building on Ballygunge Circular Road in Calcutta.

That clandestine radio station was one of the most important politico-cultural devices of the Liberation War and was the first of its kind in Asia. Its broadcasts influenced the western media to report against US-funded Pakistani oppression. Much of South Asia has felt the effects of the Richard Nixon administration, and particularly that of the late Henry Kissinger, whose influence outlived his tenure as national security adviser to Nixon by several years.

It was also the BSF that received Tajuddin Ahmed and Amirul Islam. The BSF's Director General, K. F. Rustamji, arranged their meeting with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and personally escorted them to meet her.

Rustamji took a personal interest in backing the Mujibnagar government, which was housed in a BSF safe house in Calcutta from April 1971 until Dhaka was liberated.

Both the roles of the BSF and the Mukti Bahini need to be remembered better in Indian history books. The contribution of both has been ignored by some military officers who have written about their experiences at the eastern frontier during the 1971 war. Some such officers have praised both the BSF's and the Mukti Bahini's roles in private conversations with me. But in public, they abstain from acknowledging the role of any other force. The BSF has a history that deserves fuller acknowledgement and more honest representation in the writing of the war.

The writing of history has a duty to rise above the limitations of men telling their own tales of bravery—a challenge that South Asian historians will no doubt meet with ease and rigour. I am eager to read that complete and granular history of the liberation



The Bangladesh national flag being hoisted at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Calcutta, shortly after India's recognition of Bangladesh, 6 December 1971.

Initially, the BSF housed them for two months in Tripura and provided logistical and technical support to the radio team. The radio programmes were recorded and broadcast from different locations in Tripura, starting in April 1971. On the one hand, the BSF was supporting the radio station in Tripura; on the other, it was also running covert operations with the Mukti Bahini from there.

After two months, the Indian R&AW saw the value of the radio station and helped set it up in Calcutta. There too, it was the BSF that gave them a home in

of Bangladesh that will be taught to generations ahead.

That red building on Suhrawardy Avenue is still awaiting its due recognition.

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determination, and culture. That was perhaps the first brick-and-mortar institution to emerge from collaboration between the Indian government and the exiled government of Bangladesh. During the nine months that the struggle lasted, it hosted meetings of the War Cabinet and discussions between Bangladeshi political leaders of different allegiances but with the common purpose of liberating Bangladesh. It is also a testament to the work of the Swadhin Bangla Bazaar Kendra and housed the first-ever diplomatic mission of Bangladesh.

I learn this during my research into India's secret and covert role in the

