MUKTI BAHINI AND THE LIBERATION WAR OF BANGLADESH: A REVIEW OF CONFLICTING VIEWS

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Introduction

The liberation of Bangladesh was achieved through a nine-month long war, in which all patriotic people of the country contributed from their respective positions. The war started as a spontaneous resistance against genocide by the Pakistan army, but soon assumed the character of an organised war of attrition for the liberation of Bangladesh. It was essentially a people’s war, which was epitomised by the army of freedom fighters known as Mukti Bahini (MB) in Bangladesh. The war finally ended with the defeat of the Pakistanis by the joint forces of MB and the Indian Army, which got involved in the war at the last moment. The involvement of Indian forces in liberating Bangladesh and the crucial role that it played in forcing the Pakistanis to surrender, provides the ground for interpreting the role of MB from different perspectives. In Bangladesh, freedom fighters are lauded for being instrumental in liberating the country, although they are assessed differently by other concerned parties % Pakistanis and Indians. As a result, there exist at least three distinct views regarding the role of Mukti Bahini in the liberation war: the Pakistani and the Indian views as well as the self-assessment of the freedom fighters themselves.

This paper tries to introduce these conflicting views and revisit the actual role played by the freedom fighters of Bangladesh in liberating their country. The article has been written on the basis of analysis and assessments made mostly by people who were involved in the war, either in the battlefields or as researcher, or both. Pakistani and Indian views have been taken from the writings of their respective military commanders, while those views have been substantiated or negated by quoting Mukti Bahini sources. Though all the views quoted in the article have arguably been influenced by the personal as well as collective interests of the concerned authors, one can identify such limitations and see the true state of affairs through a variety of different interpretations and assumptions.

Background of the War

The liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 was a logical conclusion of the Bengali nationalist movement that started soon after the formation of Pakistan in 1947. The movement, based on the nationalistic aspirations of the Bengalis living in erstwhile East Pakistan, was fuelled by the continuous neglect of Bengalis and their interests by the Pakistani rulers. The nationalist movement reached its high point when Yahya Khan, the then President of Pakistan, refused to hand over power to Awami League, the party which received absolute majority in East Pakistan in the national elections of 1970. In protest, a non-cooperation movement was launched by Awami League. Addressing a mammoth rally in Dhaka on March 7, 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the absolute leader of East Pakistan at the time, declared: “This struggle is the struggle for freedom, this struggle is the struggle for independence”.1 In the same speech, Mujib also asked the people to continue the struggle even if he could not give any more orders.2 However, instead of accommodating the majority party, military rulers of Pakistan chose the path of confrontation. The volatile situation exploded when the Pakistani rulers resorted to brute force and genocide to suppress the struggle of the Bengalis to achieve self-rule. In this sense, the indiscriminate use of military force by the Pakistan Army, which was initiated on the March 25, 1971 served as the immediate cause of the Bangladesh war of liberation.

Genesis of Mukti Bahini

All freedom fighters were generally known as Mukti Bahini (MB). There were two broader sections among them: those who came from military, paramilitary and police forces were called Niyomito Bahini (regular forces), while the freedom fighters from a non-military background were referred to as Gonobahini (people’s forces). The names were given by the government of Bangladesh. To the Indians, however, the Niomito Bahini was known as Mukti Fouj (MF), and the Gonobahini as Freedom Fighters (FF).3

The regular forces of MB were created from among those Bengali troops in Pakistan who revolted and joined the Liberation War. According to Pakistan army sources, there were about 5,000 regular soldiers from six battalions of East Bengal Regiment (EBR), 16,000 troops from East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and 45,000 Police posted in the then East Pakistan4. Most of these Bengali troops, particularly soldiers, NCOs and junior officers were strongly influenced by the ongoing nationalist movement, and were psychologically prepared to play their role in liberating Bangladesh. However, they had taken an oath of loyalty to preserve the integrity of Pakistan, and could violate that only when they were asked by a superior
authority, i.e., the Bengali political leadership, which was the only recognized authority in East Pakistan at the time. Besides, they were scattered, without any unified Bengali command. Some of the officers sought instructions from the political leadership through friends/relatives, but no concrete guidelines came. The general expectation was that a last moment political solution would be reached. As a result, most of the Bengali troops revolted at the eleventh hour, in many cases only after they were attacked or about to be disarmed by Pakistani troops. This often resulted in unplanned confrontations and casualties on the part of Bengali troops.

It should be mentioned, however, that some courageous officers took the grave risk of revolting without any specific directives from the political leadership. Among them were Major (Retd.) Rafiquil Islam, Major Gen (Retd.) Shafiullah, Major General (later President of Bangladesh) Ziaur Rahman, Major general (later killed in a military coup) Khaled Mosharraf and a few others. But there were instances where most of the Bengali troops were wiped out by the Pakistanis due to lack of timely initiative on the part of the officers.

Although the war of resistance by Bengali troops and civilians started spontaneously after the Pakistan army crackdown on March 25, 1971, the war was fought by separate units and groups without any central coordination. The first attempt to coordinate war efforts was made on April 4, 1971 in Telapara (Sylhet), where a number of senior Bengali military commanders held an important meeting. A few days later, on April 14, the Mujibnagar government officially declared a structure of the Bangladesh liberation force, naming it Muktifojy under the command of Colonel MAG Osmani. However, it was not before the middle of July 1971 that the Mukti Bahini was formally organised, through a conference of senior Bengali officers arranged by the Mujibnagar government. This conference dealt with vital issues like creation of war sectors, demarcation of sector boundaries, organising the guerrilla and regular forces, formulating war strategy and tactics. It was decided to divide Bangladesh into 11 sectors and 69 sub-sectors in order to consolidate war efforts. In addition to that, 3 independent brigades were to be created, namely ‘K’ Force under Major Khaled Mosharraf, ‘S’ Force under Maj. K.M. Safiullah and ‘Z’ Force under Maj. Ziaur Rahman.

The total number of fighters available at the moment included about 18,000 regular forces (made up of EPR, EBR and Police forces), about 150 officers and around 130,000 guerrillas. In addition to that, there were many independent forces of guerrillas, who organised resistance under their own leadership. Most prominent among such forces were “Kader Bahini” (forces commanded by Kader Siddiki, also known as “Tiger Siddiki”, from Tangail), consisting of about 17,000 fighters, “Afjar Battalion” consisting of 4,500 fighters and “Hemayet Bahini” with about 5,000 fighters. There were also other smaller forces organised by local initiative. Some leftist organisations, including the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and others developed their own guerrilla forces.

Independent of all the forces mentioned above was the Bangladesh Liberation Forces (BLF), popularly known as Mujib Bahini. This force, numbering about 5000, was mainly drawn from the Awami League and its student front Chhatra League, and was trained under the direct supervision of Major General Ubam of Indian Army at Deradun hills. The formation and training of Mujib Bahini took place against the wish of the Bangladesh government authorities, which led to a conflict situation between the two. However, Mujib Bahini remained a part of the broader liberation forces and fought against the common enemy until the liberation of Bangladesh.

**Pakistani views on Mukti Bahini**

The general opinion about MB among Pakistani military officers and policymakers was obviously hostile, since these were the forces that they had tried so hard to eliminate. They looked upon MB merely as Indian stooges, who were no match for the mighty Pakistan army. In addition to that, a tendency to underrate the MB and their activities is also clearly visible among them. At the same time, there are certain subtle differences of opinion among the Pakistani authors regarding the role of Bengali Freedom Fighters.

Some Pakistani authors including Major General A.O. Mitha, who served as the Deputy Corps Commander of Pakistan army in occupied Bangladesh in 1971, Brigadier (Retd.) Z.A. Khan, who earned his ‘fame’ by arresting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the night of 25th March 1971, Major General Hakeem Arshad Qureshi and others, who commanded a Pakistani battalion in occupied Bangladesh, treat Mukti Bahini with pronounced disdain in their respective autobiographies. Z.A. Khan, for instance, mentions the name “Mukti Bahini” only twice in his 400-page book on his military career, and prefers to call Bengali freedom fighters “rebels”. But even he indirectly admits the effects of MB activities on his fellow soldiers, when he writes: “in this period (e.g. June-July 1971 – author) army officers would not move around the city (of Dhaka – author) without...”
an escort, each officer would have at least three or four men in his vehicle, there was no movement after dusk.”

To General A.O. Mitha, MB was merely an extension of the Indian forces, which could have been dealt with properly had Pakistani military adopted an appropriate strategy under a more capable leadership. In his autobiography, Mitha hardly tries to conceal his despise for the Bengalis. But even he recognises the hard reality: “…once it was clear that the majority of East Pakistanis no longer wanted to be a part of Pakistan, there was no sense in continuing to fight except to be able to surrender on honourable terms.”

General H.A. Qureshi’s account of the war has been written in the same line. As far as he is concerned, the war was fought between Pakistan and India, where the MB just supplemented the Indian forces. Qureshi is also convinced that “there were a substantial number of Indian and army personnel in the garb of Mukti Bahini guerrillas.”

Similar views have been expressed by another retired Pakistani General % Kamal Matinuddin. He admits the increasingly active role played by the MB in 1971, but claims that “the effectiveness of the Mukti Bahini was grossly overestimated to build up their own morale, lower that of the Pakistan Army and gain more international support”. Matinuddin asserts that such lack of effectiveness of the MB was due to the fact that it was not sufficiently trained to fight regular battles, that the Bengali freedom fighters “were mostly trained for insurgency operations”. But then, quoting some Indian sources, Matinuddin hints at the racial superiority of the Pakistani “martial race” by stating that the Bengalis were mortally afraid of Pathans and Punjabis and would not confront them in the battlefield. He sees the main contribution of MB in “providing superiority of the Pakistani “martial race” by stating that the Bengalis freedom fighters “were mostly trained for insurgency operations”. But then, quoting some Indian sources, Matinuddin hints at the racial superiority of the Pakistani “martial race” by stating that the Bengalis were mortally afraid of Pathans and Punjabis and would not confront them in the battlefield.

General AAK Niazi, who served as the commander of Pakistani occupation forces in Bangladesh during the war, shows slightly different perception of the Mukti Bahini from the other Pakistanis mentioned above. He acknowledges the fact that the MB was gradually growing stronger both in terms of military training as well as morale. He also admits the impact of MB operations on the Pakistan army, when he laments that his forces were taking casualties “without fighting on account of Mukti Bahini’s guerrilla activities”, which was “adding to the strain on the proud army.”

However, he is convinced that many Indian regular troops operated “in the guise of Mukti Bahini”. As proof for his contention, Niazi cites the explosion at Hotel Intercontinental in Dhaka and the destruction of bridges, which he claims could not have been done by Bengali Guerrillas.

Curiously, Niazi blames Indian press for understating the role of MB. His contention is that India exaggerated the successes of MB before the Indo-Pak war started, “but in actual war, they tried to play down the achievements of Mukti Bahini … This was an attempt to belittle the role of Mukti Bahini in order to glorify the Indian Army and give all the credit to Indian troops”. Niazi’s resentment against Indians is not surprising, since he holds India and USSR responsible for instigating the liberation war of Bangladesh: “if the Indians and the Russians had not helped the Bengalis they would have never dared to revolt against the centre”. In any case, one may perceive such statement as an indirect way of acknowledging that the MB did have impressive achievements. Nevertheless, Niazi’s despise for MB was strongly reflected in his initial strong resistance to surrender to the joint forces of India and Bangladesh.

Major General (Rtd.) Rao Farman Ali, who was Niazi’s opponent in the Pakistani occupation army in Bangladesh, also has a curious theory about Indian intentions with regard to Mukti Bahini. He asserts that the Indians saw MB as their ultimate enemies because they would oppose Indian domination in future. Hence, the Indians wanted to weaken the MB by sending them on short offensive operations against Pakistan Army. As a result, Both MB and Pakistan Army (both of whom were Muslim, reminds Rao) were seriously affected. However, General Rao does not explain whether the indiscriminate genocide of Bengalis by their “Pakistani Muslim brethren” was also instigated by India. It is also relevant to mention that Rao, just like Niazi, opposed the idea of the Pakistan Army surrendering to the Indo-Bangladesh joint forces % he insisted that the words “Mukti Bahini” be deleted from the instrument of surrender.

This brief survey of the attitude of Pakistan Army commanders regarding Mukti Bahini clearly shows how biased it was. On the one hand, they admit, directly or indirectly, the serious effects of Mukti Bahini operations, on the other hand they do not want to give MB the credit for it. They would rather blame the Indian Army for acting in the “guise of Mukti Bahini”, because that would save them the “disgrace” of admitting casualties at the hands of Mukti Bahini. They did not want the name of Mukti Bahini to be mentioned in the instrument of surrender for the same reason; it would be a shame for the mighty Pakistan Army to
surrender to the army of Bengalis, whom the Pakistani military leaders had got accustomed to treat as racially inferior “black bastards”32.

From the beginning of Pakistani military crackdown on Bangladesh till the end of the war, there was not a single day when the Mukti Bahini did not carry out offensive operations against Pakistan Army33. These actions were carried out by the young fighters of Mukti Bahini, not Indian soldiers. Until the latter half of November 1971, the Indian Army or even the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) did not take part in active part in hostilities except providing training, weapons and logistic facilities to MB. All guerrilla operations in occupied Bangladesh were conducted by Bengalis, not Indians, though most of those Bengali guerrillas were trained and armed by Indians. For example, the attack on Hotel Inter Continental mentioned by Niazi, was carried out by a dedicated group of young guerrillas, all of whom were students from Dhaka34.

Another point that needs to be addressed in this connection is the “fear of Pathans and Punjabis” among the Bengalis that Pakistani Generals are so fond of narrating. There is no doubt that ordinary Bengalis were afraid of Pakistani soldiers, whether they were Pathans, Punjabis or Sindhis. If they were not, ten million people would not have fled from occupied Bangladesh and sought shelter in India. The reasons for such fear are well known. There are many accounts from independent sources of the atrocities committed by Pakistani forces at that time. One of the most horrifying descriptions of Pakistani brutalities has been recorded by Anthony Mascarenhas, former Assistant Editor of Daily Morning News, published from Karachi. Mascarenhas visited Bangladesh in the middle of 1971 and had the opportunity of watching Pakistan Army actions from close quarters. Afterwards, he fled to London and published a story in the Sunday Times, London, on genocide in Bangladesh. In it, Mascarenhas gives details of the casual way in which ordinary Bengali people were killed, tortured and humiliated by Pakistani soldiers and officers. All these crimes against humanity were carried out under such code names as “cleansing process”, “sorting out” and “punitive operations”35. It was this barbarity of Pakistani soldiers that made the Bengalis fear and hate them, not their superior racial quality.

But once the “timid” Bengalis received the basic minimum training, arms and ammunition, they started striking back at their tormentors. By October 1971, the Mukti Bahini became so strong that even the mighty Pathans and Punjabis began to fear them. To prove this point, it would be relevant to quote Siddiq Salik, the then Public Relations Officer (PRO) of Pakistan Army in occupied Bangladesh, regarding the matter:

“Travelling from Dacca and its suburbs towards the interior, one could not help feeling that one was passing through an enemy area. It was impossible to move without a personal escort which, in turn, served as a provocation for the rebels. They ambushed the party or mined its path. If one reached one’s destination safely, one could look back on the journey as a positive achievement”36.

The same Bengalis, who used to be so afraid of the Pakistanis at the beginning of the war, had now acquired the skill and power to restrict the movements of their enemy%now it was the turn of the tormentor to be afraid of its victim.

The Indian perspective

The Indian view of MB was essentially different from the Pakistani perspective. When millions of distressed Bangladeshis fled from occupied Bangladesh, India was faced with the huge problem of providing them with food, shelter and other essentials. In addition to the refugees, there were members of Bengali armed forces and thousands of young people who wanted military training, arms and ammunition. In this background, Mukti Bahini grew and developed in close cooperation with Indian armed forces. Naturally, there is a much better understanding of MB among Indian military and political leaders.

Lt. General (Retd.) JFR Jacob, Chief of Staff of India’s Eastern Army during the Bangladesh War of Liberation in 1971, gives a brief but precise assessment of the strength and weaknesses of the Mukti Bahini, and of the role that it played in his book on the war37. Jacob explains that a large number of guerrillas had to be trained within the short period of three to four weeks, which had an adverse effect on the performance of MB. Besides, there was a shortage of proper leaders among the freedom fighters, as many young people who could be utilised as guerrilla leaders were absorbed by the regular forces. Jacob believes that “had this manpower and leadership been utilized to make up hard-core guerrilla forces they would have achieved much better results”38. Nevertheless, Jacob duly recognises the achievements of MB. This is how he summarises their effectiveness:

“Despite the limitations of training and lack of junior leadership, they (e.g. Mukti Bahini - author) contributed substantially to the defeat of Pakistani forces in East Bengal... They completely demoralized the
Pakistani Army, lowering their morale and creating such a hostile environment that their ability to operate was restricted and they were virtually confined to their fortified locations. The overall achievements of the Mukti Bahini and the East Bengal Regiments were enormous... Their contribution was a crucial element in the operations prior and during full scale hostilities.  

Similar assessment of MB has also been made by Major General (Retd.) D.K. Palit of Indian Army. Commenting on the enthusiastic support given by Mukti Bahini to the Indian Army, Palit states that “the support and cooperation supplied by the guerrillas was remarkable. The elements of the Bahini trained and equipped to fight as regular infantry were, in view of the short preparatory period, not as operationally significant as the vast number of guerrilla groups that acted as eyes and ears for the advancing forces” Palit also emphasizes the impact of MB operations on the Pakistani forces:

“Senior commanders among the Pakistani prisoners of war have since confirmed that the Mukti Bahini guerrillas so controlled the countryside that very little night movement could be undertaken outside the cantonments and fortresses. In most areas only daytime patrols were carried out % and then only in large bodies.”

At the same time, Palit points out some of the weaknesses of Bangladesh’s struggle for liberation. He particularly blames the political leadership of Bangladesh for failing to organise the future resistance forces in time. He laments that “after the nation stirring events that followed the Declaration of February 12, and even more so after March 1st, there still was no effort to establish a coordinated resistance plan with officers of the armed forces”

Major General Sukhwant Singh, another Indian commander, is not so enthusiastic about MB. Without understating the contributions of the Mukti Bahini, Singh asserts that the “hope of a solution through Mukti Bahini had receded, for it was apparent that it would take such a movement years to unloosen the military stranglehold on Bangladesh” However, Singh also acknowledges that the “initial Mukti Bahini operations helped the Indian Army, which got to know the Pakistani pattern and concept of fighting”

The most comprehensive study of the Indian views on the Mukti Bahini has perhaps been done by Captain (Retd.) S.K. Garg in his book titled “Freedom Fighters of Bangladesh”. Beginning with the theoretical framework and practical aspects of modern guerrilla warfare, Garg examines the performance of MB in the Bangladesh war of liberation. He highlights the effects that were made by the guerrilla activities of the MB, pointing out that, “As days went by, the Mukti Bahini expanded the scope and frequency of its hit-and run raids, ambushes and attacks on small isolated enemy positions which resulted in liberating the occupied territory...” Garg maintains that “during a war of only 14 days, the difference of two weeks amounts to the total contribution made by India’s Defence Forces to the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, that too at such a crucial moment when time was a vital factor...”

Contrary to that, Garg also refers to other Indian Army officers who expressed doubts about the efficacy of the Mukti Bahini. According to these critics, “by itself, the Mukti Bahini was not competent to liberate Bangladesh and ... without the physical intervention of India’s Defence Forces, Bangladesh’s struggle for liberation would have been inordinately delayed or even degenerated into a Vietnam type of war with an unpredictable outcome”. Based on personal experience, some of these officers had formed rather low opinion of the Bengali freedom fighters, and believed that the inexperienced, poorly trained and inadequately armed Mukti Bahini was no match for “brutally-ruthless and well oiled Pakistani war machine”. Some officers, according to Garg, also claimed that Bengali freedom fighters were reluctant to confront the ‘khaki-outfitted Pakistani soldier’.

However, Garg hastens to add that those adverse opinions about Mukti Bahini are mainly concerned with irregular guerrillas, whose “low intensity operations, during a regular war, are naturally relegated into the background, due to the high intensity of regular operations”. Nevertheless, concludes Garg, “It would be unfair to assume that the Mukti Bahini remained totally ineffective. In one or two sectors they might have been less successful as pointed out by some Indian officers; but, by and large, they did more than anyone had expected them to do....The regular guerrillas were certainly much more effective than their counterpart % the irregular guerrillas.”

Although such conclusion drawn by Garg appears to be balanced, it has a tendency of generalising the weaknesses and ineffectiveness of the irregular guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini. Guerrillas who were given a hasty two-week long training could not be a match for experienced Pakistani...
soldiers. Similarly, those guerrilla groups which lacked appropriate leadership also could not perform up to the mark. Books have been written by former members of the Mukti Bahini, which describe the way in which the guerrilla movement was born and matured. For example, “Guerrilla Theke Sommukh Juddhe” (From a Guerrilla to the frontal fight), a war time reminiscence, narrates with intricate details about how a group of Bangladeshi young man from different walks of life was transformed from an ordinary, non-violent student into tough guerrilla fighters in order to save the life and honour of their fellow countrymen. Kader Siddiki, the renowned freedom fighter from Tangail, also narrates details of formation and operations of his guerrilla forces that constantly harassed the Pakistan Army in the area. These and many other books written by former Mukti Bahini members show the readers the great sacrifice that the Mukti Bahini had made in 1971 to liberate from Pakistani occupation.

Concluding Observations

The Bangladesh war of Liberation was a multi-dimensional event of great importance. First and foremost, it was a struggle waged by the people of Bangladesh to achieve independence. Secondly, as India supported the cause of Bangladesh, this struggle was translated into a regional rivalry between India and Pakistan. Finally, in the Cold War perspective, the struggle also triggered a triangular international power game between USA, USSR and China. In this larger international and regional canvass, the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh is not always seen in the appropriate perspective. The Indo-Pakistan War of December 1971, which was the culminating point of Bangladesh Liberation War, tends to overshadow the slow and painstaking but effective struggle that Mukti Bahini had waged against the occupation army of Pakistan for preceding nine months.

Whether or not Mukti Bahini could liberate Bangladesh on its own is a mere academic question, since India, burdened with the problem of 10 million Bangladeshi refugees, was in no position to wait for that. The government and the people of Bangladesh also preferred a quicker end to their agony. The Mukti Bahini did what it could, and history shows that its performance not only made life miserable for the Pakistan Army, but also paved the way for a speedy Indian victory. That is why for the people of Bangladesh, Muktijoddha (freedom fighter) and Muktijuddho (liberation war) are connected inseparably.

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