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1965 Indo-Pak War: Busting the myth

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THIS article is to recall the 17-day war of Sep 1965 between India and Pakistan that, among other things, helped to do two things as far as the Bengalis were concerned. One, it completely destroyed the myth created about the Bengalis being a non-martial race. And secondly, it exposed the lax preparedness for the defence of the eastern wing of the country. President Ayub Khan of Pakistan, in his book “Friends Not Masters”, had exposed the discriminatory mindset of the Pakistani establishment towards their Bengali compatriots. The September War was an opportunity for the Bengalis in the armed forces to vindicate their military prowess.

Forty nine years ago on 6 September 1965, a full-scale war broke out between India and Pakistan. It was a short 17-day war that was virtually confined to West Pakistan and parts of the disputed territory of Kashmir. As the war unfolded, the Bengalis all over Pakistan were excited over the stories of heroism by the 1st Battalion, The East Bengal Regiment (EBR) in the defence of the key Pakistani city of Lahore. Also in the air, stories of valour by Bengali pilots of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) greatly inspired the Bengali youths. The West Pakistanis used to belittle the Bengalis by calling them a non-martial race; this was belied by the military prowess and bravery shown by the officers and men of Bengali origin. The war also exposed the eastern wing's vulnerabilities with so little military assets to defend it. The war is virtually forgotten in Bangladesh today, despite the fact that the Bengalis played an important part in it.

Pakistani leadership at that time had led the nation to a disastrous war that was fraught with serious political and military lapses. After the debacle in the border war with China in 1962, India started a massive expansion and modernization of its armed forces with generous aid from the Soviet Union and Western powers. Pakistani leadership realized that the possibility of militarily pressurizing India was fast slipping away as the power balance tilted more towards India. They started planning a secret military operation to force India to come to a negotiated settlement on Kashmir. In early August 1965, Pakistan launched a clandestine operation, code named “Operation Gibraltar”. The aim was to infiltrate inside Indian held Kashmir and to demolish bridges, cutoff supply lines, etc to create panic among the populace. They also set up a radio station, called “Sada-e-Kashmir”, purported to be the voice of the Mujahedin fighting for Kashmir's liberation. The assumption was that the radio broadcast, along with the guerilla activities, will trigger a general uprising among the Kashmiris. None of that happened. In fact, many of these infiltrators were arrested, killed in encounters and often were handed over to the authority by the locals. By the end of August, Operation Gibraltar petered out; remnants of the so-called Mujahedin tracked back to Pakistan.

On 1 September 1965, regular Pakistani troops crossed the cease fire line (CFL) and moved towards Jammu. The forces made quick advance and in the next couple of days threatened to cut Jammu-Srinagar road. The Indian PM gave a warning on 2 September that unless Pakistan withdrew its forces across the CFL, India would respond “at a time and place of its own choosing”. The Indian response came on 5-6 Sept night when it launched attacks across Sialkot and Lahore. The Indian response was full one month after the Pakistani incursion. The Indian forces, besides threatening two key cities, poised to cut the vital Grand Trunk (GT) road. At this time, the 1st Battalion of the EBR was deployed in the defence of Lahore along the Bambawali- Ravi-Bedian canal, commonly known as BRB canal. They held their ground despite repeated Indian attacks. At the end of the war, this regiment had the honour of being awarded the highest number of gallantry awards among all the regiments of Pakistan Army.

In the air war that followed, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had a qualitative edge over the IAF in terms of pilots and aircraft, which, despite IAF's quantitative advantage, gave PAF a slight edge in the end. Here too, a number of PAF pilots of Bengali origin earned high military honour. Many Bengali soldiers and airmen embraced martyrdom and many others were wounded in battle.

By the second week into the war, Pakistani forces were running out of ammunition and spares. US had imposed on both the warring sides an arms embargo which hurt Pakistan badly because almost all her weapons were of US origin. Pakistan had no option but to accept a UN resolution for a ceasefire to take effect from 22 September 1965. An initiative by the Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, resulted in a peace deal, known as “The Tashkent Declaration”, signed by the warring parties on 4 January 1966 in Tashkent. The declaration was hailed as a new beginning of peace. It stated that both countries will pull back their forces to pre-war positions, will restore economic and diplomatic ties and will initiate orderly exchange of prisoners. The treaty was viewed by many Pakistanis as a diplomatic defeat for President Ayub. Ayub never recovered from the fall of his stature after Tashkent and was ousted four years later in the face of popular uprising.

This was a war that had no clear victor or vanquished. The aim of the Pakistani high command was to seize a portion of Kashmir to force India to the negotiating table; on the other hand, India's aim was to stop any Pakistani incursion and not to allow external interference in the Kashmir issue. In the end, India largely achieved her aim and objectives, while Pakistan was in disarray. The facade of democracy that President Ayub created was shattered because what to speak of the ordinary people, even the Parliament or the Cabinet was not consulted when the vital decision to send infiltrators into Kashmir was taken.

On the economic front, Pakistan suffered badly due to war. The 3rd Five Year Plan (1965-70) was virtually in tatters. 6% GDP growth rate of early 1960s almost stalled by the end of the decade. East Pakistan was cut-off from its western wing during the War. A deep sense of separatism and alienation grew in East Pakistan as an aftermath. The war raised the issue of the defence of East Pakistan. With only one infantry division, a squadron of fighters and no naval assets, except for a few patrol crafts, East Pakistan was

virtually defenseless. In June 1966, the Awami League in its 6-Point Programme demanded greater defence investment in East Pakistan which soon became a rallying point for the Bengalis. Among the demands were shifting of the NHQ to Chittagong, establishment of an ordnance factory and raising of a paramilitary force to augment the defense of the eastern wing. The Bengali soldiers, sailors and airmen proved that as professional military men they are second to none. We honour those valiant sons of the soil who gave their best in the field of battle in September 1965 to keep up the honour and dignity of the Bengali nation. Many veterans of 65-War displayed the same valour in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

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