

The Reasons for the Outbreak of Civil War: The Role of India and Operation Searchlight

Political Background

After the **1970 general elections**, the Awami League's victory gave it constitutional right to form the central government.

However, **Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Yahya Khan** refused to share power, fearing loss of West Pakistani dominance.

This refusal created a **constitutional deadlock**, which soon turned into a political crisis.

Root Causes

Decades of **economic exploitation, political marginalization, and cultural suppression** fueled resentment in East Pakistan.

The West controlled trade, industries, and military power, while the East remained underdeveloped despite producing major exports like jute.

East Pakistanis viewed themselves as **second-class citizens**, and the federal structure failed to ensure equality.

Operation Searchlight (1971)

On **25 March 1971**, the Pakistan Army launched **Operation Searchlight** to suppress Bengali nationalism.

Military units attacked **Dhaka University**, political offices, and civilian neighborhoods. Thousands were killed.

Rather than restoring order, this operation ignited **widespread rebellion**, giving rise to the **Mukti Bahini** resistance movement.

The brutal campaign turned the political crisis into a **humanitarian catastrophe**.

The Role of India

India had both **humanitarian and strategic** motives.

It sheltered over **ten million refugees**, trained the **Mukti Bahini**, and conducted diplomatic campaigns for Bangladesh's independence.

In December 1971, after continuous cross-border clashes, **India invaded East Pakistan**, defeating Pakistani forces within two weeks.

India's involvement changed an internal political crisis into an **international war**.

International Response

The **Cold War rivalry** shaped international reactions.

The **US** and **China** supported Pakistan due to alliances, while the **USSR** and **India** cooperated through the **1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty**.

Global opinion, however, sympathized with the Bengalis because of massive civilian suffering. Pakistan's international image suffered, and it became diplomatically isolated.

Consequences

- Pakistan's military surrender on **16 December 1971** ended the civil war.
- **Bangladesh** emerged as an independent state.
- Pakistan suffered a **loss of territory, population, and morale**.
- The **failure of political compromise** became a lasting lesson for future governments.

The civil war of 1971 was thus the result of **accumulated injustices, political arrogance, and denial of democracy**, intensified by **military brutality and Indian intervention**.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the 1971 civil war was not a single event but the culmination of **decades of unequal treatment and political short-sightedness**.

Operation Searchlight turned dissent into rebellion, and India's involvement internationalized the crisis.

The tragedy teaches that **nations cannot survive without fairness, dialogue, and respect for diversity**.