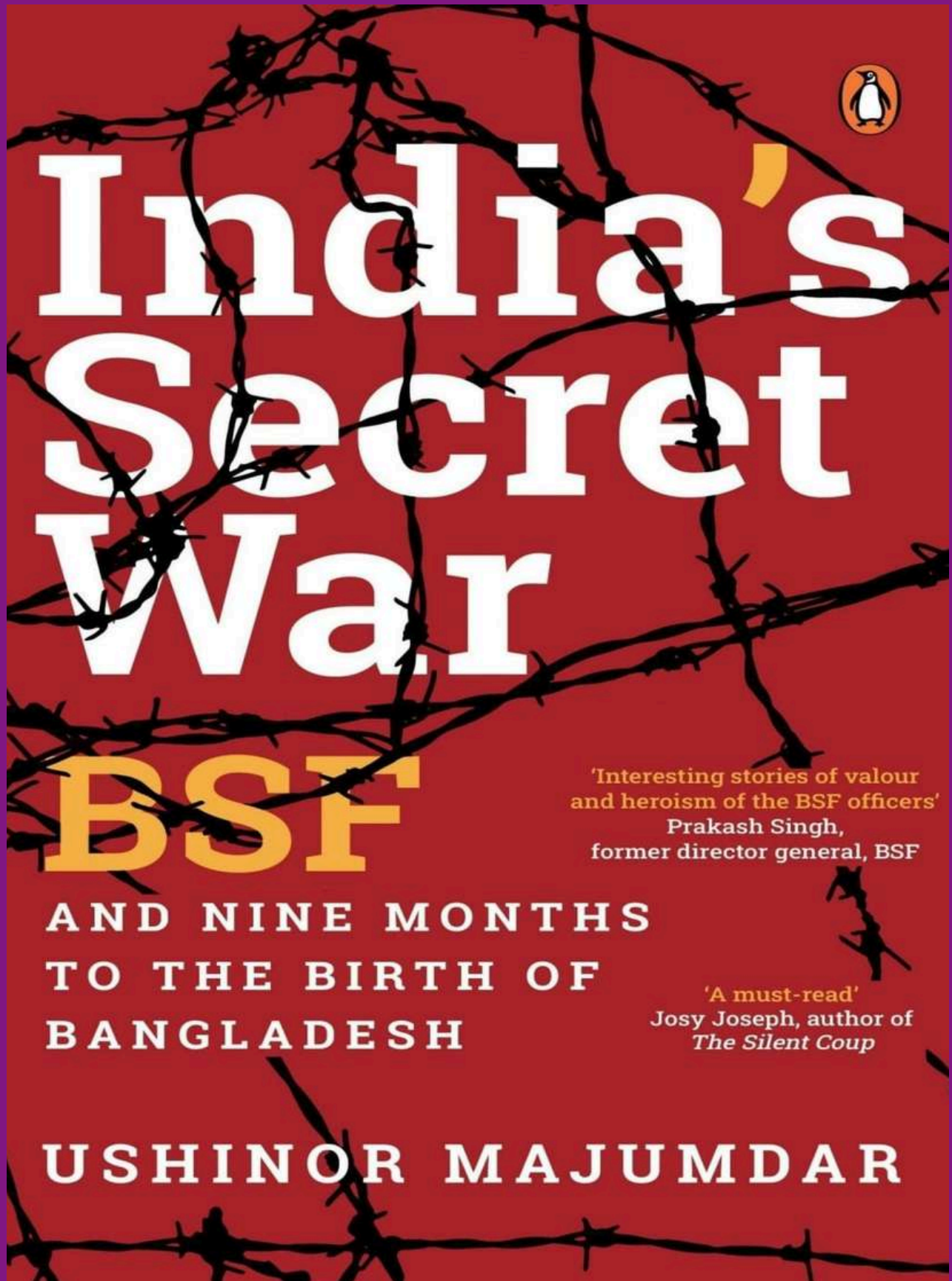


BOOK REVIEW

India's Secret War: The BSF and the Sub-Conventional
Warfare and the Birth of Bangladesh
Authored by *Ushinor Majumdar*



Introduction

There are books that tell the story of a war, and there are books that explore the war from a different angle. Ushinor Majumdar's *India's Secret War* falls into the second category. It relies on deep research and personal accounts instead of the official Indian Army-focused history. The award-winning journalist uncovers an aspect of the 1971 geopolitical shift that most military history overlooks: the nine months during which the Border Security Force, led by DG K.F. Rustamji, engaged in cross-border sabotage, radio warfare and intelligence work alongside the Mukti Bahini, acting as a guard for two states, one of which was not yet formed. For joint-services strategists, the book is a study of how organisations adapt, of diplomacy at the front lines, and of hybrid warfare conducted under specific limitations.

Central Argument and Methodological Framework

The book's main contribution is its deconstruction of the critical nine-month pre-conventional baseline, demonstrating how a fledgling BSF strangled Pakistani logistics and sustained internal resistance before December 1971. Calculated sub-conventional calibration is framed as setting the theatre for absolute conventional victory, rather than as a footnote to it. Twenty-six chronologically sequenced chapters, bookended by a prologue and epilogue, trace the covert war from "The First Plan" through "The Road to Dacca." The method is one of archival reconstruction and field-based oral history rather than secondary commentary, cross-referencing documentation against a diverse matrix of primary interviewees: surviving war veterans, intelligence officials, aid workers and local citizens.

What the book sets out to do?

The book's first strength is specificity. Chapters such as "The Fall of the Subhapur Bridge," "The Heroes of Killapara" and "Home-Made Rockets" reconstruct named operations rather than generalised valour, while "Radio Revolution" charts the synergy between psychological warfare via the Swadhin Bangla Betaar Kendra and frontline tactical defence. Second, provenance is taken seriously: the dedicated List of Interviewees establishes the basis for testimony-based claims, while frontier-wise BSF casualty data and the formal list of Liberation War honours anchor the human cost in verifiable primary documentation, converting what could have been oral-history journalism into a source-auditable institutional record. Third, credibility rests on investigative method rather than institutional standing. Majumdar, a reporter with a track record at *Outlook*, *Tehelka*, *Hindustan Times* and *Caravan*, corroborates veteran testimony against archival record rather than reproducing it uncritically; the endorsement of former BSF Director General Prakash Singh lends institutional sanction to what is, fundamentally, an outsider's audit. Sacrifice is grounded in citation rather than sentiment.

Where the book falls short?

Three limitations qualify the achievement. The volume occasionally chooses episodic, journalistic accounts of tactical heroism rather than macroscopic grand-strategic analysis; it is operationally compelling but thin at the level of doctrine. The methodology is heavily reliant on internal BSF archives and oral testimonies, and carries a localised institutional bias that tends to cloud the structural inter-agency frictions and the joint coordination dynamics between the BSF, R&AW and the Indian Army's Eastern Command. Finally, the text often treats broader global geopolitical shifts as side issues to frontline sabotage operations. An expanded systemic assessment of joint warfare doctrine would improve its utility for current grey-zone strategic planning.

The Larger Debate and Enduring Relevance

The book speaks to a live debate: how paramilitary forces can act as force multipliers before conventional war even begins. The BSF's 1971 playbook arming proxies, running sabotage, waging psychological warfare reads like an early Indian case study in what would now be called hybrid warfare, and a reminder that paramilitary capability deserves a real seat in national security planning rather than an afterthought. With India-Bangladesh ties strained again since the 2024 upheaval in Dhaka, its ground-level account of trust built across a once contested border feels newly relevant to today's planners.

Conclusion

India's Secret War deserves to be seen as a genuine contribution to how we think about sub-conventional and hybrid warfare in South Asia. Majumdar surfaces the BSF's unacknowledged role in shaping the battlefield before 1971's conventional war even started, and in doing so hands strategic planners a real blueprint for grey-zone thinking. The narrative does lean heavily on one side of the story, but it still offers sharp insight into inter-agency coordination, psychological operations and border management. Its real takeaway: the war we credit to thirteen conventional days was largely won in the nine undeclared months before it.

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