

# Bangladesh 1971: War Crimes, Genocide and Crimes against Humanity

## Operation Search Light: The Targets

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### Introduction

The genocide committed in Bangladesh in 1971 is widely considered to be one of the worst genocides in recent history. But this genocide, despite the indiscriminate killings of a huge number of innocent men, women and children was also very much target oriented. Hence the fact that this military operation was code-named Operation Search Light is self explanatory in the definition and the scope of the operation itself. But this is in no way to imply that because it was a targeted killing, it was any less than genocide rather on the contrary it was the worst kind of genocide for two very specific reasons. Firstly the targets were mostly civilians and secondly although Bengali paramilitary forces (East Pakistan Rifles) and police were attacked right on the night of March 25 1971 when the operation started, the attack was an undeclared war on the basis of ethnic identity. Therefore although the objectives and operation were well defined and the target of killings and tortures of all degree and dimensions were preplanned, this in no way reduces the responsibility of causing genocide in Bangladesh from March 25,1971 till December 16, 1971. It must be remembered that the broader target was the entire Bengali population in the erstwhile East Pakistan. According to Asia Times, ' at a meeting of the military top brass Yahya Khan declared, " Kill three millions of them , the rest will eat of our hands". Accordingly on the night of 25 March , the Pakistani Army launched Operation Searchlight to crush Bengali resistance in which Bengali members of military services were disarmed and killed, students and the intelligentsia systematically liquidated and able bodied Bengali males just picked up and gunned down. According to various sources three million people were killed by the Pakistani Armed Forces and their accomplices in Bangladesh. It was one of the largest genocides in the modern known history. I must admit that the scope of discussion on this genocide is too wide to be encompassed in this discussion within this short time. I will, therefore, specifically focus on two targets of Operation Searchlight namely the students and the women.

### Reasons for Students as Principle Targets

If we take a look into the making of Bangladesh and the struggle the Bengali nation had to go through soon after the creation of Pakistan in August 1947, we must say that the students in the erstwhile East Bengal played a vital role. Whether it was in opposing Muhammad Ali Jinnah's unilateral declaration in March 1948 that "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan ", or subsequently in demonstrating for making Bengali as one of the National Languages of Pakistan or eventually getting shot by the police on 21 February 1952 , the students were found everywhere in their struggles and sacrifices for the nation. Students in Bangladesh were forward looking progressive bunch of young men and women who supported Bengali Nationalism not because they were narrow nationalistic but Bengali Nationalism to them meant a freedom from the shackles of an artificially imposed sense of

nationalism based on religious divisions which was contrary to the history of South Asia where Hindus and Muslims have lived in peace and harmony over several centuries. The students, therefore, in the eyes of the Pakistani junta were seen opposed to the very notion of a communal Pakistan. The Bengali students were seen first as a potential threat to Pakistan and then as an actual threat when the Language Movement in Bangladesh gradually evolved into a broader socio-political and economic movement for the emancipation of the Bengalis who comprised the majority in Pakistan and contributed the lion's share into the exchequer of the country. Hence when in 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's six-point demand was placed before the Pakistani rulers it was increasingly seen amongst the Bengalis as the Magna Carta of Bangladesh. Once again the students came forward in support of the provincial autonomy which was seen as the last possible solution for the apparent integrity of Pakistan. But that resort was destroyed when despite election results going in favor of autonomy, the then military junta in Pakistan combined with Islamic fundamentalists refused to grant autonomy or hand the power over to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who from 1969 came to be known as Bangabandhu, the friend of Bengal. Eventually again the students in Dhaka University were the first to design and hoist a flag of an Independent Bangladesh. This definitely was a cause of fury for forces opposed to democracy and human rights. During the entire period of non-violent, non-cooperation movement between March 1 and March 25, the students protested vehemently against the Pakistani conspiracy of undoing the first ever held national election on the basis of adult franchise in the country. In a nutshell, the students in the erstwhile East Bengal which was later named East Pakistan played the most important role throughout the evolution of Bengali Nationalism in Bangladesh.

## Attack on Dormitories of Dhaka University

The first simultaneous attacks came on what was then known as Iqbal Hall, a student dormitory and Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University. It may be mentioned here that Jagannath Hall is exclusively meant for non-Muslim students, particularly Hindus and Iqbal Hall's residents were mostly members and supporters of the then East Pakistan Student League, a student wing of Awami League. We, therefore, notice that although most young men and to some extent young women too, were the targets of attack by the Pakistani Army and their auxiliary forces, the first attack on the students were also very much target oriented. The massacre on the 25th March actually began from Dhaka University. After dormitories have been shelled at a point blank range, any students remaining alive were shot or bayoneted to death. Major General Fazal Muqem Khan, the official historian of Pakistan Army wrote: The army had to use rocket launchers to break open some rooms of the hall. The correspondent from the British newspaper Daily Telegraph, Simon Dring reported on March 30, "Led by the American supplied M-24 World War II tanks, one column of troops sped to Dacca University shortly after midnight. Troops took over the British Council Library (situated within the campus) and used it as a fire base from which to shell nearby dormitories areas. Caught completely by surprise some 200 students were killed in Iqbal Hall, Headquarters of militant anti-government student union, I was told. Two days later, bodies were still smouldering in burnt-out rooms others were scattered outside, more floated in a nearby lake." But this was just the tip of the iceberg. In addition to Jagannath Hall and the erstwhile Iqbal Hall, students of all ages, irrespective of their religious or gender identity were killed, tortured or at the least humiliated. Students were considered as the harbinger of the Independence Movement of 1971 and hence they were the principle target of murder and atrocities in 1971.

Neither gender nor age was a factor in deterring the perpetrators of war crime from committing atrocities and murder. Female students were not spared either. In this context it is very important to note that female students too were subject to equal subjugation and torture by the Pakistani Army. On March 30, 1971, the American Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, sent a telegram to the State Department recounting the Pakistani atrocities in Dhaka. In it he wrote about the massacre at Rokeya Hall at Dhaka University where, according to Blood, the building was "set ablaze and girls machine-gunned as they fled the building." On March 31, 1971, Archer Blood

sent another telegram which recounted atrocities against girls. Blood wrote: "Six naked female bodies at Rokeya Hall, Dacca U. Feet tied together. Bits of rope hanging from ceiling fans. Apparently raped, shot and hung by their heels from fans." Small notes they may be, but they bear a very big footmark of the atrocities of the Pakistani Army and their collaborators in crime.

It may be mentioned that during the early days of Operation Searchlight Pakistani army killed students instantaneously by shooting or by launching rockets in the dorms. But when the dorms were emptied and the surviving students fled this Operation Searchlight intensified and was extended even to remote villages. Students were rarely shot at sight, on the other hand they were caught, interrogated if they had links with the Freedom Fighters or Mukti Bahini and even if they had not any link or it was not proven, the innocent students were tortured and slowly killed.

## A Personal Experience in 1971

Here I may add a brief anecdote, although it is neither funny nor fictitious, which would prove that despite my teen age I was targeted in those days, questions briefly and was then let go. Fortunately I was not subjected to usual atrocities owing to my very proficient use of Urdu Language. In 1971 I was scheduled to take my Secondary School Certificate but during the non-violence non-cooperation movement on March 22, many SSC examinees gathered at Dhaka Stadium gate and vowed not to take the exam unless Bangladesh became an independent country. After the army crackdown on the night of 25 March 1971, the situation took a u-turn and the surviving people inside Bangladesh were turned into merely captive. In an apparent show of normalcy during the operation searchlight the government wanted educational institutions to be functional and wanted a huge number of examinees to take the School Final Exam. In the second week of April 1971, we wrote and cyclostyled several leaflets asking the students not to take the upcoming exam as silent protest against the occupation forces of Pakistan. I took some of these leaflets in my pocket and started off for my school, PAF Shaheen School. On the way Pakistani army started questioning me, about my school, background etc. As I looked smaller than my age, I did not say that I was a possible examinee, I rather said I was in grade Nine. The entire interaction took place in Urdu and at the end my blood chilled when they said to each other, "Let's leave him. He is not Bengali. Bengalis don't speak Urdu so well. Little did those Jawans know that in less than 30 minutes time I was to enter the premises of the Air Force School in my mad pursuit to convince my friends not to take the examination.

## Bengali Women as Target of Torture & Atrocities in 1971

Women in an essentially male dominated society, even to this day, have always been a vulnerable section of the populace and their vulnerability was adequately exploited by Pakistani Junta and their collaborators. They were made targets of torture in either of two ways:

- a. Directly through Rape and Subjugation
- b. By Applying Gendercide where able Men in the family were killed leaving the Women helpless

During the nine months of military crackdown on the entire Bengali civilian population in Bangladesh, according to Bangladesh Government at least 200,000 Bengali women of all ages were raped and ravished. After the Liberation of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the country tried to honor these dishonored girls and women by naming them the War Heroines and had ordered to prepare of list of these persons

who were subjected to sexual torture of the highest degree. A Ladies' Hostel in Dhaka was established to initially start rehabilitating these women and girls. However, due to social stigma against a woman who had sexual relationship outside the wedlock, unwillingly though, very few tortured women responded to this call and recognizing the social stigma Sheikh Mujib had to ask later to destroy the lists of these women so that in their own society, in a free country, they are not considered untouchables. This is how the exact number of tortured women are lost now. In the meantime, many of them committed suicide and some of them who were pregnant by the Pakistani soldiers or their associates left for Pakistan where they thought they would remain unidentified beyond the boundary of their own society. Shahriar Kabir, in his book, *Tormenting Seventy One* quotes Professor Nilima Ibrahim, former Head of Bengali in Dhaka University and Director, Bangla Academy saying that 30/40 raped women were leaving country along with the War Detainees who were going to India in 1972. She met the women and requested them to stay in Bangladesh. But they were determined to leave their own country as they were not accepted by their own kins. Shahriar Kabir mentions in his book about a teen-aged pregnant girl who, despite requests by Neelima Ibrahim, decided to go to Pakistan for the fear of social criticism. Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against Our Will: Men Women and Rape* writes, "An Asian relief secretary for the World Council of Churches called a press conference in Geneva to discuss his two-week mission to Bangladesh. The Reverend Kentaro Buma reported that more than 200,000 Bengali women had been raped by Pakistani soldiers during the nine-month conflict, a figure that had been supplied to him by the Bangladesh authorities in Dacca. Thousands of the raped women had become pregnant, he said. And by tradition, no Moslem husband would take back a wife who had been touched by another man, even if she had been subdued by force. "The new authorities of Bangladesh are trying their best to break that tradition," Buma informed the newsmen. "They tell the husbands the women were victims and must be considered national heroines. Some men have taken their spouses back home, but these are very, very few." She adds, "200,000, 300,000 or possible 400,000 women (three sets of statistics have been variously quoted) were raped. Eighty percent of the raped women were Moslems, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindu and Christian women were not exempt. As Moslems, most Bengali women were used to living in purdah, strict, veiled isolations that includes separate, secluded shelter arrangements apart from men, even in their own homes. The Pakistanis were also Moslems, but there the similarity stopped. Susan Brownmiller also mentions about Hit and Run Rape committed by Pakistani Army and their collaborators in Bangladesh. She also mentions about the Biharis and the Razakars taking active part in the rape of Bengali women and girls. Brownmiller writes, "According to victims, Moslem Biharis who collaborated with the Pakistani Army - the hireling razakars - were the most enthusiastic rapists.

The accepted figure of pregnant women through rape by the Pakistani army and their paramilitary forces with Bengali and non Bengali collaborators is estimated around 25,000. Many were able to go for abortion, some well to do went to Kolkata, many were treated by rural quacks resulting in deaths and sterility amongst women. Brownmiller writes, "Dr. Geoffrey Davis of the London-based International Abortion Research and Training Centre who worked for months in the remote countryside of Bangladesh reported that he had heard of "countless" incidents of suicide and infanticide during his travels. Rat poison and drowning were the available means. Davis also estimated that five thousand women had managed to abort themselves by various indigenous methods, with attendant medical complications". Planned Parenthood, in co-operation with the newly created Bangladesh Central Organization for Women's Rehabilitation, set up clinics in Dacca and seventeen outlying areas to cope with the unwanted pregnancies. In its first month of operation the Dacca clinic alone reported doing more than one hundred terminations. Perhaps the story of this torture where women and girls were target alone could go on for ever.

However, apart from direct raping of women, Pakistani Army and their collaborators also committed a crime of genocide. In addition to calling it a genocide, the killing could also be termed as gendercide where selective killings were done amongst the adult male Bengali population. The war against the Bengali population proceeded in classic genocidal fashion. According to Anthony Mascarenhas, "There is no doubt whatsoever about the targets of the genocide":

They were: (1) The Bengali militarymen of the East Bengal Regiment, the East Pakistan Rifles, police and paramilitary Ansars and Mujahids. (2) The Hindus -- "We are only killing the men; the women and children go free. We are soldiers not cowards to kill them ..." I was to hear in Comilla [site of a major military base] [Comments R.J. Rummel: "One would think that murdering an unarmed man was a heroic act" (*Death By Government*, p. 323)] (3) The Awami Leaguers -- all office bearers and volunteers down to the lowest link in the chain of command. (4) The

students -- college and university boys and some of the more militant girls. (5) Bengali intellectuals such as professors and teachers whenever damned by the army as "militant." (Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh* [Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1972(?)], pp. 116-17.)

This genocide had another consequence. While men were being kidnapped and killed, women were raped.. Bengali women were targeted for gender-selective atrocities and abuses, notably gang sexual assault and rape. Indeed despite , and perhaps because of, overwhelming targeting of males for mass murder, it is for the systematic brutalization of women that the Rape of Bangladesh is best known western observers. Susan Brownmiller in her book , *Against Our Will: Men Women and Rape* writes," 200,000, 300,000 or possibly 400,000 women were raped. Eighty percent of the raped women were Moslems, reflecting the population of Bangladesh, but Hindu and Christian women were not exempt ..... Hit and run rape of large numbers of Bengali women was brutally simple in terms of logistics. I must add here that the raping of Hindu and Christian women had the clear sight of forced pregnancy which was aimed at communal cleansing operation. The Pakistanis , in their failed attempt of Islamization in Bangladesh, adopted this particular cruel and anti human approach of cleansing the followers of particular faith. Brownmiller further writes, "Rape in Bangladesh had hardly been restricted to beauty. Girls of eight and grandmothers of seventy five had been sexually assaulted." Brownmiller also says, " Pakistani soldiers had not only violated Bengali women on the spot ; they abducted tens and hundreds and held them by force in their military barracks for nightly use. This therefore proves that the effect of genocide on Bengali women folk was devastating. It may be mentioned here that many women were not only raped , their bodies were ripped off, their sexual organs mutilated and bayoneted and the naked dead bodies were thrown away to feed the scavengers.

Finally I would once again emphasize on the point, as I did a couple of years ago at a seminar in New York that acts which are considered as war crimes took place in Bangladesh. They include rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution or forced pregnancy. Killing and all other forms of atrocities carried on different section of people, with a common denomination of being Bengali, in the erstwhile East Pakistan are war crimes and generally crime against humanity.

References:

1. Death by Government by R J Rummel
2. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* by Susan Brownmiller
3. *The Rape of Bangla Desh* by Anthony Mascarenhas.
4. *Tormenting Seventy One* by Shahriar Kabir