

Intensity of Physical & Mental Pain
Dr. M A Hasan

The war that was waged by the Pakistani army against the unarmed civilian of Bangladesh on 25th March 1971 was not a civil war or a reprisal action of army. It was a preplanned pogrom and genocide to wipe out freedom loving democratic people of East Pakistan. The brute Pakistani army initiated the worst massacre of the history targeting civilians, civilian objects and undefended places. The very initiation of the war was through massive molestation of civil and political rights as well as Geneva Convention.

There may be debate regarding the definition of genocide. But, there is no doubt that nearly 1.8 million people were eliminated during the war of 1971. Hindus were eliminated just because they were Hindus. Three millions was the official figure of death. At that time, nearly 10 million people were displaced due to the preplanned pogrom conducted by the Pakistani army and their collaborators. There were many incidents of enforced disappearances and violence on women. Nearly 200000 women were recognized as rape victims immediately after the war. Many research workers has categorized and claimed that violence as more extensive and wide. Losses of public and private properties were so immense that it could not be regained in decades. In terms of money it was no less than one thousand billion of which a single penny could not be recovered as reparation.

“Operation Search Light”, which was initiated on 25th March 1971 through mass killing, rape, arson and looting, soon extended its operation in the entire country. It swallowed the whole nation. The country became a deadly prison. It was not a civil war; it was preplanned genocide and a process of ethnic cleansing.

The barbaric acts of mass killing and torture could only be compared with the killing and tortures of the Jews and Russian prisoners of war at the hands of Nazis. The Notorious dictator Ayub Khan considered the Bangalees as a lower class race, unfit to enjoy any kind of freedom--“Pakistanis had every right to rule over the defeated nation-Bangalees”, that was his point of view. (Massacre. Robert Payne, page 30). To understand the criminal mindset of the generals the statement of general Niazi was enough. “Bangalees were often compared with monkeys and chickens,” said Pak Gen. Niazi. “It was a low lying land of low lying people”. “The Hindus among the Bangalees were as Jews to the Nazis, scum and vermin that should best be exterminated”- that was his comment.

In 1971 the Pakistani atrocities reached the pinnacle and could be compared to those of Nazis in 1941 in the Balkan region. It started with the youths and gradually people of all ages were included in the ethnic cleansing irrespective of sex and age group; male and female of all age groups were exterminated as the Jews were exterminated through a root and branch extermination campaign. The Nazis during that time massacred the soviet prisoners of war and Bolsheviks. In a similar way the Pakistani army started operation searchlight on 25th March 1971 to wipe out their targets. The youngsters were considered as their potential enemies.

The genocide that took place at Boroitola of Kishoreganj in 1971 had hardly had any parallel in the history in respect of barbarism. The Pakistani collaborates gathered 1500 people at Boroitola railway line. They were given false hopes that they would be provided with ID, so that they would remain undisturbed. They were forced to make a procession and give slogans in favor of Pakistan.

Suddenly a rumor was circulated that some Pakistani soldiers had been killed by freedom fighters. That news instantly infuriated the army captain. He ordered his soldiers to tie all prisoners together and fire. It was difficult to kill so many people by bursts of fire. So they used

heavy Iron shovels to kill all. Finally they killed 366 people by bayonet charge and left 134 people badly injured.

Pak troops captured Barguna town on 14 May of 1971. On 15 May they launched mass killing on the bank of the *bishkhali* river. The mass killing in Barguna was undertaken under the leadership of DMLA **Major Nader Pervez and Captain Shafayet**. The two largest mass killings in Barguna were carried out on 29 and 30 May.

On 28 May **DMLA Major Nader Pervez** came to Barguna. At his orders Pak army carried out the cruelest and most barbaric jail killings on 29 and 30 May. That day when the first bells sounded for classes in Barguna Zilla School the town of Barguna shook up at the sound of shootings in the jail. People wherever they were in the streets and around suddenly stopped, calling out "Allah! Allah!" The raiders left after shooting quite a number of times like this.

After the terrified screams and death moans faded away, people of the Peace Committee came and buried the people half-dead from gunshots in the mass grave dug on the southwestern side of the jail. This way on the first day 55 persons, and next day 36 persons were shot dead.

While the Pakistani army went wild in a killing spree, some of their associates, mostly peace committee members and muslim leaguers, got involved in forced conversion of religion.

Professor Prafullah Chandra Sharker of Rajshahi University was in his village 'Jogisha' in 1971. In an interview he had mentioned to a WCFFC representative that 42 innocent villagers were killed in Jogisha in one day by the Pakistani army. He said that many Hindus of village Jogisha were converted to Islam by force. His own cousin had to become a Muslim under the threat of death. 'Karmakars' a cast among Hindus saved their life by becoming muslims. They would have been eliminated if they had not embraced Islam. Famous historian, Prof. Ratan Lal Chakrawarti of Dhaka university stated that he and his relatives had to save their life by becoming muslim. Many Hindu women had their sikhur erased and broke their white bangles to become sex slaves of the Pakistani army. Statements of some sex slaves have been published in the book 'War and Woman'.

Of all of them, the tragic story of Mrs. Kamini Mohan Deb of Chunarughat can be cited as an example of sex slave. "During the liberation war, the Pakistani army raided the Hatunta village of Habigonj. Hatunta is a small village beside Dhaka Sylhet high way. When the army failed to find their target, they entered the house of Kamini Mohan Deb. Just after the initial interrogation, a few of them went wild and began raping. They not only violated the wife of Kamini Mohan Deb but also tortured other girls in the neighboring area. Later, Pakistani capt. Yosuf and his associates created a mini prostitution center at that house and used Ms. Dev as one of their comfort girls. After liberation Kamini Mohan vanished with his wife.

The Bangalees were not only killed for the sake of killing but also for looting their assets, especially if they were Hindus. Unfortunately some Bangalee police constables were also involved in looting. The Hindus who left for India leaving behind their wealth and assets could not get them back even after liberation.

The biggest and most gruesome women rights violation of the world

The tyranny and tortures of Pakistani army during the liberation war has shaken those who are conscious of human rights. The ideas of human norms and values have been questioned. Facts regarding torture of Bangalee women have surpassed all records of violations of women. About 4,50,000 women were sexually assaulted in front of their husband, children, father, mother and all In-laws in the villages, towns and business centers. This was done with a vengeance to hurt the moral fiber of Bangalee nationalism. Many of them have been lost in the cavern of time forever and those who are still surviving are passing through bad times--distressed, disturbed; shattered by dark memories.

The barbarian Pakistani force and their agents used to adopt some pattern in their tortures to women. It has been revealed that-

1. Most of the Hindu women were raped and killed in the month of March & April. In some cases the violated women were handed over to Rajakar's, Al-Badors and collaborators for rape and killing.
2. In the beginning of April, the muslim women were raped on the spot in front of father, mother, son and all in-laws to satisfy their sadistic and perverted desire and to hurt the Bangalee sentiments and nationalism. (80% of rape victims were muslim)
3. In some cases the Bangalee girls were kept in camps to be used as sex slaves.
4. In some cases the women were taken from camp to camp, and from one place to another place to use them as comfort girls.
5. During torture they used to severe their breasts; mutilate the private parts and ampute limbs to satisfy their sadistic drive and fetishistic desire.

Many of the women being victims of sexual assaults had either succumbed to death or become infected with pelvic inflammatory diseases. They got sexually transmitted diseases and suffered from various complications. In most cases, the after effect of torture was sleeplessness and depression. It led them to death or an agony near death.

The married women who were accepted in our society after the war have faced unpalatable comments from their own family and neighbors. Many have accepted them as stark reality. Bangabandhu in order to honor them termed them as Birangana (the Braves). But it had little impact. If the Pakistani criminals and Rajakars could be brought to justice perhaps, that would have salutary impact on the issue. That is yet to happen.

The tortures on women in the soil of Bangladesh in 1971 by Pakistani soldiers could only be compared to those of in the hands of Japanese in nanjing of China and those of Russia and Armenia in the hands of Nazis during World War II. The psychologist and psychiatrist have termed these violations of human rights as grave perversion, sadism and paranoia. As they were being defeated, they were inflicting more atrocities on a wider scale. Siddiq Salek has mentioned about Niazi's lust for women in his book "Witness to Surrender". His sexual assault of hundreds of Bangalee women has been corroborated in the report of the Hamodur Rahman Commission. The more he was losing in the battle fields and failed to defeat the Bangalees, the more sexual assaults he was committing to achieve a sense of victory and sadistic pleasure.

Many of the violated women who became pregnant had to go through abortion in govt. hospitals and private clinics with the help of local and foreign NGOs. The Mother Teresa Baby home took care of many war babies. In Natore Rajbari, a 250 beds hospital was established as per instructions of Mother Teresa. Swedish international Planned Parenthood established an abortion clinic at Eskaton, Dhaka. The live babies were kept in 'Baby Homes' with assistance from CORR, ISS Agency New York, CARE and CARITAS. Families in European countries and Canada adopted many war babies.

Gender based tortures committed by Pakistanis have been well narrated by Browmiller in her book at page 83: 'Rape in Bangladesh had hardly been restricted to beauty; girls of 8 and grandmothers of 75 had been sexually assaulted. Pakistani soldiers had not only violated Bangalee women on the spot, they abducted them times of hundred and held them by force in their military barracks for nightly use. Some women have been raped 8 times in a night. It is difficult to find out the exact number of sexually assaulted women because many of them have been lost forever. Many of them have been shown as freedom fighters and some of them were lost in the wilderness. The biggest human tragedy of women violation has not been properly illuminated to rest of the world. Unfortunately, it would remain hidden in the dark chapter of human history.

The nature of sexual assaults of the women in captivity were so perverted that such criminal activities could be only be compared with the case histories of the book 'Psychopathia Sexualis' written by Richard Von Krafft. Perversions of Pakistani hordes were so inhuman that psychological and genetic analysis of them has been demanded to determine their criminal traits. Even for today, this is necessary to justify their mindset and traits. In the background of repeated heinous crimes in many countries of the world, it is desirable to perform genetic analysis to determine criminal traits in some special cases. The tortures and violation of human rights by the Pakistani soldiers in 1971 and subsequent revelation of such criminal facts, which escaped the world notice, educate us about a human tragedy and failure. The world should know about the tortures and violation of human rights.

The research on the tortures campaigns has revealed the nature and types of the crimes were as follows.

1. To kill the doubtful persons by gunshots.
2. Physically fit, young and energetic teenagers, youths etc in a body used to be lifted as per scheduled plan. Perpetrators used to inflict inhuman tortures on them and finally shot them to death. At the end, bodies used to be individually and or collectively tied and thrown into rivers, swamps, and lakes.
3. To line up and brushfire.
4. To kill in presence of relatives by butchering and cut into pieces.
5. To sever various limbs in front of the relatives of victims.
6. To gauze the eyes.
7. To hang naked, keep them reverse by hanging and then skin off form head to toe.
8. To smash heads with the help of blunt weapons.
9. To put the captives into sacks and beat them to death or put them in sacks tying tight and throw them into rivers.
10. Tie them in a rope, beat them up, totally bruise and bleeding to death.
11. To put various limbs in bamboo traps to bruise and crash to death.
12. To kill by physical tortures and bayonet them to death.
13. To tie up with the rope and thrown them into flames.
14. To kill by throwing into rivers or flames and boiler.

The nature and types torture by Pakistan soldiers were as follows:

1. To call bad names, spitting on faces, an eyes, serve urine in place of water to drink.
2. To burn with lit up cigarettes.
3. To push hot rods and ice cubes into rectum.
4. To place high powered lights on eyes.
5. To use live wires at anus, genital organ and different parts of bodies to inflict electric shocks.
6. To inflict boxing, kicking and others.
7. Push needles into fingers.
8. Removing nails by force.
9. Gauzing eyes.
10. Putting pepper on severed skins and wounds.
11. Crushing joints and damaging nerves by blunt injuries.
12. Squeezing testis and traumatizing it by blunt weapons.
13. Pushing gun barrels and sharp bottles into vaginas.
14. Pressing bodies with bamboo.
15. Putting body on ice and beating.
16. Hitting with hot water bottles.
17. Beating with leather belts soaking in the water.

Mental tortures of the dazed people:

The Pakistani soldiers became mad to destroy the wealth of the people by setting fire on the houses of the people and looting their properties. Their preplanned killing, arsons, looting, rape, genocide, setting fire of the houses and other brutality were so widespread that the world had to see the greatest mass exodus in 1971. Within a short time between the end of March and 31st August 1971 about eighty-two lakh, eighty one thousand and two hundred twenty people were forced to take shelter in the neighboring country India. Of the total number of refugees 69.71 lakh were Hindus, 5.41 lakh Muslims and 0.44 lakh were those belonging to other religions (Reference, Bangladesh document, page 446, published by the foreign office of India.)

The distressed, displaced and shelter less people of Bangladesh received warm sympathy and generous help from India and its people. Their plight and agony could draw the attention of the world community.

The inhuman tortures inflicted upon the people forced them to go to India for shelter. The tortures were so widespread that they created panic prompting people to migrate to India by any route. Majority of the refugees took shelter in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. They ran for safe shelter to save their lives leaving behind their properties, houses, assets and their dear homesteads. They crossed rivers, swamps, creeks, canals and jungle in search of safe haven. In the process they were forced to leave behind their beloved homes and birthplaces. Even the old and infirm left their country by any means.

And in the refugee camp one saw what one didn't expect to encounter even in nightmares. Emaciated, old, infirm, skeletons of hungry people, children, dirt, disease, despair, dearth of food, sharing food and flies, diarrhea patients with fishy odor and those cries of lost people. In the midst of chaos some people hawked and yelled.

In this perilous long journey the displaced people lost their nearest and dearest ones forever. Many of them had to face undesirable humiliating situations. Many of them after liberation could not return to their homesteads. The victims whose relatives became martyrs, homeless and passed through miseries not only got deprived of their belongings, homes etc after liberation but also did not get justice.

The war that was initiated by Pakistani military junta in 1971 was specifically against Bangalee nationalism and the Bangalee race. Bangalees were killed just because they were Bangalees. Target of the genocide was the Bangalee race. Hindus among them were killed just because of their religion and their racial identity. Only the collaborators, obedient Pakistanis, apparently docile Bangalee Muslims were spared for technical reason. Besides, whole country was under the threat of gun.

Women Trapped in War:

In an analysis of the wars that took place in the last two hundred years it can be seen that wherever war took place in the name of communal hatred, repulsion, impatience and violence, a huge number of women and children were tortured. The abuse of women and children is inextricably related to every war that sought vengeance and reprisal. The League of Nations passed an ordinance through the Geneva Convention to stop maltreatment of the war prisoners, and the abuse of women and children at the time of war. At the same time laws were also enacted to lessen and restrain the attacks on individuals and private establishments. Although many countries of the world have promised not to break the Geneva Convention, powerful nations, regardless of being barbarian or civilized, have always tortured the civilians of the enemy state to satisfy their spite. Women and children were the victims of their malice.

When war crosses borders and breaks rules the civilians and women are entrapped. Civil wars affect women more than enemy aggression. Women are not only raped and tortured; they also lose everything and even their shelters as their husbands and children are killed. Only the sufferer

would perceive what befell the women when the breadwinners were murdered. It is quite impossible to bear the psychological trauma as the husbands and the children are lost. We would only feel the depth of the crises if we go through the oral retelling of the situations the affected women had to go through when faced with the challenges of running their families after the deaths of their husbands.

Vulnerable Innocent Women:

The enemy not only kills their husbands and sons but also abducts them. Then the enemy sets fire to crops, houses and properties. In a situation like this the victimised women had to struggle for existence and the survival of the surviving members of her family. When women are left with no choice they have to travel with their families to a safe and distant land leaving behind their houses, lands, poultry and sometimes all of their life savings. The dangers and uncertainties of such escapes could only be perceived by analysing the trails of those women to unknown territories.

In this context, we tried to discover facts related to the torture and rape of women and the lives they had to lead after the deaths of the bread earners of their families, as they had to take charge of their families during the War of Independence. We tried to see what befell those women beset by relentless dilemmas in the face of war: as they had to safeguard their families on the one hand and on the other suffered from the traumatic experience of sexual violence for which they blamed no one but themselves. Here, we have also documented the oral testimony of the devastated women who had waited for years for the return of their husbands and sons who were abducted by the enemy, to analyse the agony and hopelessness from which they had suffered. These women dangled between hope and hopelessness as they tried to search out the missing members of their families.

We tried to record the unending pain, shame, grief, anguish, and deprivation and cruelty the society inflicted upon women who had suffered for a long time at the hands of the enemy. We could understand why many women couldn't retell all of their stories. Some said very little. But even these short oral narratives revealed undiscovered histories of the relentless suffering of the women. It was a very difficult task to go to these victimised women and ask questions about the hitherto concealed truths of their lives. In certain cases these victimised women were abandoned by the country and were excluded from their society. No one stood by them when proper physical and mental treatment, help, compassion and love were necessary for them. As a result these women discovered that they were being treated as untouchables. Normally, women who were raped but did not have to pass days in the enemy camp, or women whose being raped were not widely known tried to save themselves from further deprivation with the help of their families. But these didn't relieve them of their sorrow, grief and agony. They could only save the faces of their families. Their families concealed these facts and married off these women to any men who were easily available. This way right of these women was violated and they suffered even more.

In a very planned way the Pakistani soldiers raped women to satisfy their hatred, cruelty, and perversions. Sometimes they raped women to insult the Bengalis and sometimes they raped women methodically so that they could break the morale of the nation. After killing Hindu men they tortured Hindu women and hurled them out of their houses and properties in the name of ethnic cleansing. Sometimes they raped Hindu women in the name of Islam. They wanted to root out the Bengali nation in the name of Islam as they tortured them brutally. The Pakistani soldiers also raped the Muslim women of this country so that virile Pakistani Islamic minded men are born. Time and again the women of our country, living in every nook and corner, were tortured and raped. To affect our pride they raped our mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives methodically. To force away the Bengali families one after the other they killed the men and raped the women brutally. They huddled the women in temples and other sacred places and raped them to defile those religious places. The Pakistani soldiers wanted to affect the honour and pride of men so that

they could prove that the men of this country are cowards. In all the villages, small towns and cities of Bangladesh the Pakistani soldiers used this method. Even the remotest areas were also attacked.

Pakistani soldiers tortured and raped the women of this country and looted and plundered as they suffered from complex psychological problems and are affected by false logic and abnormal mindset. For that reason woman found herself in the midst of an overwhelming struggle as she lost the bread earner head of her family and lost her children. The woman had to wait days after days as she expected the missing member of her family to return home. Some women were also harassed as they tried to look for the members of their families who were missing. They sometimes became vulnerable as they tried to search out the members of their families. Women were tortured and raped as they went to look for the missing persons.

After all these there were many who did not run away from their lands as they tried to live on whatever food they could collect. In these situations the old people, the woman and the children tried to scarp away whatever they could save from the devastations of war and lived in inhuman situations. But they had to run away from one shelter to the other, as the enemy did not allow them a moment's respite. They had to take cover in haystacks, in backyards, in farm areas, in ploughed lands, in cowsheds and even in kitchens. They did not even have time to take the food they preserved with so much care. In the unhygienic places of their dwellings they suffered from insect bites. They suffered from the attacks of snakes and blood sucking worms. They suffered from diseases of all kinds as virus and bacteria attacked them. Many lost their invaluable eyes due to fungus infection and as their eyes got in contact with paddy plants. Diseases carried by insects like endemic dengue, anopheles and viral fevers claimed a lot of lives. Many suffered for ages as their hands and feet got wounded and rotten. Added to these, there were the suffering of starvation, threats of pneumonia due to cold and outbreak of diarrhea because of the scarcity of pure drinking water. Getting treatments for these were almost impossible. To find a doctor and getting proper treatment after having lost everything were big gaping challenges. And those who were wounded by bullets, for them it was the biggest challenge as every man and woman shot with bullets was a suspect in the eyes of the Pakistani soldiers.

For the dreadful terror of the Pakis even the children got extremely frightened and hid themselves under beds, behind wardrobe or under the piles of straw. These children were burnt alive to ashes by the Pakistani soldiers even without the knowledge of their mothers in the fire lit with gunpowder, which scattered everywhere.

This happened on a day in the monsoon of nineteen seventy-one. Bhanu Begum of Tangail was engaged in her household chore. All of a sudden a group of nine Pakistani armies attacked her house. They tried to drag her inside the room. But Bhanu Begum did not want to surrender herself to their lust. Then the Pakis attempted to throw her five-month-old baby boy in a burning pile of straw. Bhanu Begum had to give in. At one point, during the continuous torture that went on for an hour, she got senseless. Before leaving the house the Pakis sprinkled gunpowder on Bhanu Begum and her baby boy and pushed them down in the fire. In the burning flame of fire the backside of Bhanu Begum's body got burnt and her eyes got damaged. Her baby boy Ranju's forehead's one side also got burnt.

The society is suffering even today from the terrible fright, uncertainty and restlessness that were deeply established in the people's minds and realms of thoughts. These people led a terrible life of insecurity and disgrace after leaving their own homes. The hatred, cruelty, impatience, negligence and unkindness they felt day and night, they wanted to return it back to someone else at least to some extent. This reaction was most dangerous especially among the children who were tortured along with the adults. After all looting and plundering and immoral greed were rife in the society during and after the war.

Those who did not flee from their ancestral homes were forced by the Pakis and their collaborators to work for the occupation army. People who were used by the Pakis for sexual pleasure were hated and insulted, along with their whole family, even in the independent country. Most of the women used as sex slaves and comfort girls died towards the end of the war as the enemy fired at them. Some civilians got caught in the crossfire. Some of those who were fortunate enough to escape death were insulted by the winners after the independence and were hated and abandoned by the society. Many interviews of this kind have been included in this book.

Naturally when the Pakistanis conducted brutal murders, destruction, genocide, and torture people in every household were terrified. After this when the Pakis started to kidnap or torture the refugee women or the women who took shelter on roads, schools-colleges, railway stations or in any safe house then no woman could consider herself or any other woman member of her family safe. The existence of beautiful wives, sisters and daughters became a terrible pressure to the members of every family including their parents as they considered that their reputation is related to the honour of the female members of the family. To save the reputation these families wanted to leave the country or send the women of the family to safe shelters at any rate. While doing these they sometimes could not identify friends from foes and as a result the collaborators of the Pakis came to know their movements and the innocent became the target of the Pakis. Sometimes they were caught even before starting the journey. Sometimes to save the honour of the women of the family the male members sacrificed their lives. Their belongings were looted and the women were tortured. Even after these incidents most of the families left their homes with some portable costly belongings and money or sometimes with nothing at all. Sometimes they came out of their homes as refugees with the family, or sometimes all alone with the children and at the very beginning of their journey they had to suffer unbearable pain.

The Fleeing that Seems Endless and the Sufferings on the Way:

The Pak army raped and tortured the women of this land in a planned way so that they could carry out their manifold aims. Among these a notable aim was to conduct an expedition to drive away the dedicated Awami supporters and the Hindu families out of their houses. They brought out destruction and murdered thousands of people to shatter the passion and longing for independence. They destroyed the very shelters of the innocent. The Pakis murdered the innocent, raped the women, looted the possessions of the civilians, beaten and crushed them under their feet so that no one dares to help the freedom fighters.

The Pakistanis destroyed the homes and shelters of the people in order to intimidate them in such a way that they would not dare to help the freedom fighters. In order to generate resentment against freedom fighters they were inordinately harsh in their reprisals for the slightest provocation. In this Bengali collaborators aided them. These Razakars were not only motivated by their misguided ideologies, their factional and communal hatred and intolerance, but they were spurred by aims of making political and economic gains through unscrupulous means.

‘War Crimes Genocide and Quest for Justice’, documents the persecution unleashed by the Pakistanis in the following way.

“The scale and violence of Pakistani persecution made the general population so devastated physically, mentally and economically that in utter terror and panic they fled wherever they could. This huge mass for the most part took refuge in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. Uprooted and dispossessed, they traveled through the length and width of the country trekking towards a safe haven – leaving behind their dear homeland, their homesteads, property, disabled relatives, the remains of the fallen freedom fighters, habitats that had become ash heaps. Those who were able to left using bamboos as walking staffs, baskets as carriers – they left even if they had to perch on some one’s back.

On this long trek, many were to lose their children, aged parents or loved ones. In the face of indescribable terror, they abandoned children, a mother, a geriatric father or other dear ones under the open sky, in ditches or on riverbanks. Parents helplessly gagged their own children, terror-struck in front of Pakistani soldiers and their accomplices – only to watch their beloved babies, their very own flesh and blood die of asphyxiation. Parents fled not realizing some of them were to leave their children behind in burning huts, in agonized haste they took off with bundles of clothes or quilts mistaken for their babies.

Uprooted from their homes, women during the war fled, solitary or in company – feeling helpless and insecure all the while as they encountered close brushes with cross firing, and the unpredictable dangers of a war situation. They not only feared the Pakistani enemies but also the accomplices the occupation Army had. They lived in fear of robbers and opportunists. They feared for their own lives, their safety and honor, for the meager belongings they carried with them. For the first time ever, cast out in the big open, responsible for their own survival, women have had to face innumerable hardships. The hardest was to ensure supply of food and drinking water. Ordinary people and strangers came to offer assistance but it was a difficult and humiliating experience for many women to seek help, hard to eat food dished on banana leaves or seeks out a *langar khana* (gruel-kitchen) for a life-saving meal. Many of them were forced to trade their own clothes and valuables for a beggar's bowl, for scavenged food or rotting fruit. Many were forced to drink from water holes and drains and had attacks of diarrhea. Many helpless women were to watch their children die from dehydration caused by diarrhea.

The women had extra burdens with them– they moved with their children, aged parents and the elderly. The possessions they carried had to be traded to help and treat these people when they fell sick or were about to die. The entourage slowed the distance they could cover. As a result, they would easily become preys to collaborators and criminals. Such elements would take advantage of the vulnerability and stress the women were in and cheated them of their possessions. Sometimes these women would be trapped and handed over to the Pakistani men and their cohorts. Spurred by greed and lust, many women were to lose all they had to common dacoits, even to non-Bengalis as well as the Pakistani Army.

The perils of the road were exacerbated as families became separated. Their lives were out of their control. With no fixed addresses or safe havens, they had lost ways of communicating with the families they had become separated from. The dislocated families had new problems to encounter. Each family waited endlessly to retrieve its lost members. Crossing over the border to India or reaching the Refugee Camp, which was an enormous hurdle on its own, however even that did not solve this problem. At one stage of the war, the Pak Army enforced strict control at the border. People in the hope of a safe passage had to often bribe local collaborators. They exchanged money and whatever they had placing themselves in the hands of opportunists. Sometimes gold ornaments were traded for a safe boat trip. Many were to lose their lives at the hands of the Pak Army at the fringe of the border. For the young and old, for the disabled and the bed-ridden, this passage was in all semblances a hellish journey. For after the tortuous trek, they landed in an unhealthy and pitiful life at the camps.

Agonizing Life in the Refugee Camps:

The Pak occupation Army in a very strategic manner destroyed the resources and property in this land. Private property that belonged to common people was not spared arson and looting. As a consequence of the murders, genocides, rape, looting, arson and torture of the Pak occupation Army – the largest mass exodus in history took place in the shortest period of time. By 31st August 1971, about 82 lakh 81 thousand 220 Banglalees were forced to seek refuge in different camps in neighboring country India. Of this 69.71 lakhs were Hindus, 5.41 were Muslims and 0.44 belonged to other religions. (Ref: Bangladesh Documents, page 446, published by the External Affairs Ministry of the Indian Government).

Despite all the intent and generosity invested in the Refugee Camps, it was not possible to meet the needs due to the sheer size of the number of refugees that had arrived. Bamboos and gunny cloth went up to create makeshift toilets, kitchens were created under the open sky. Puffed rice, molasses, rice, flour and lentils had been supplied. The absence of hygiene was particularly horrifying. The food centers and toilets were in appalling states. There was a scarcity of fresh clean water. On top of it all, women lacked even the bare minimum of privacy.

Torture on Women held in Custody:

During 1971, the Pakistanis incarcerated and brutally tortured married and single young girls, middle-aged and even aged women in various permanent and non-permanent camps, cantonments, army and naval head quarters. Officers and other cadres of the Army participated in the sexual abuse and rape of these women. Common soldiers were engaged in gang rape. The women being tortured and violated were the meekest part of the population. They were for the greater part women, school-going girls, housewives, working class women and ordinary members of the population who had little personal involvement in the war. They came from affected families that had not been able to flee, or hide and thus, they became prey to the Pakistanis and ended up being tortured and abused by them. Their chief crime was that they were of tender age, or comely in appearance or they represented Bengali culture and nationhood.

Women being incarcerated, humiliated, violated or sexually abused have come to be a common phenomenon in war situations. But the number of women thrown into Pakistani prisons and camps was the highest in the post-Second World War period. These incarcerations were horrifying experiences of brutality and repression. When a woman is incarcerated she is because of her sex and her physique repressed in a far more extreme manner than a male. This is why when a woman freedom fighter is incarcerated she is foremost tortured sexually.

Noorjahan belonged to a conservative family in a village called Bankura in Barisal. On seeing the barbaric atrocities of the Pakistani occupation force, she joined the liberation movement. During the last days of the war, she was responsible for communicating messages. One day she set off on her way to Shikarpur with a letter. She came under the attack of Pakistani fire weapons. A bullet pierced through her ankle. She was captured by the Pakistani army and lost consciousness after being beaten by a rifle butt. When she regained consciousness, she discovered that she had been brought to the Pakistani camp at Gournadi School. She was tortured horrifically in a hope that she would divulge the whereabouts of the freedom fighters. With her hands and feet bound she would be thrown into the pond as bayonet ends riddled her body. All the while other forms of masochistic torture would be carried out. Not occasionally but numerous times a day. She still carries the scars that the Pakistani Army left on her.

Pushpa Rani Nath is also a witness of the barbarous torture of the Pakistanis at the Borguna Jail. She was then a mother of three. The Razakars cordoned the village and its entire population of young and old was thrown into the jail, which was a stronghold of the Pakistani force. On the instructions of the Army, the women and children were taken into a separate cell. The women, who were about a few hundred in number, were roomed into a horrifically crowded cell. The men were in some other cells. Pushpa did not see her husband again. The next day her mother-in law was also brought in. Pushpa Rani would see from afar women being engaged in doing the laundry and drawing water. No one had the opportunity to talk or exchange information. During her three day stay there she witnessed how the Pak men would take women into the Dak bungalow and would abuse them there all night, each morning they would be sent back to the cell, their violated bodies draped in red sarees. In the over-crowded cell, Pushpa Rani would try to duck down in an attempt to hide from the Pak forces, lest she too would have the same fate as many hapless women.

During 1971, another woman to suffer the repressions of the Pak Army was Malati Rani Roy. She was a student of class seven at that time. She narrated how members of the Pakistan Army had

one by one brutally raped all the women incarcerated in this jail. Each night women were selected and dispatched to the Dak Bungalow, which had become the playground of the occupation army. Here the women would be repeatedly raped throughout the night. Malati Rani along with three other women had been taken to the Dak Bungalow the day she had been captured and four men under the threat of a gun raped them. Of the four, one was pregnant at that time, three days later she miscarried.

Whenever the relatives of these women approached the soldiers trying to secure the release of these women, they would be humiliated, or imprisoned or even killed. Those who did not miraculously experience torture-- had to live in utter terror and despair. Spared from regular abuse, they suffered in other forms: contracting contagious diseases, encountering problems of the menstrual cycle, being affected by lice and other forms of infestations. The women who became impregnated by their vile perpetrators were in an inexplicable anguish. The hardships of the incarceration were mounted on the stress and pain of carrying the enemy's seed.

Widowhood and Mental Crisis:

Women were not only sexually abused in the hands of the Pakistani. They have been witness to horrific torture carried out on their loved ones, sometimes they have seen their family members tortured brutally and eventually killed by the Pak Army and their cohorts in camps, prisons, mills and factories, warehouses, on river banks. Many women have had to face the reality that they would never see their loved ones gone missing. Alone and separated in the cruelest of circumstance, these hapless women were left to reckon with their loss, grief and anger on their own. Nothing anyone could have said or offered could have spared them from the agony they lived in. For a woman's relationship with her children or husband is not only of love and affection. Apart from the emotional ties, they are dependent on their husbands for economic reasons as well. The wife often would have not known where the legal documents pertaining to their property were left, how much debts were incurred, which piece of land was rented to whom, what they owed from others after a sale or a purchase. They were not necessarily well versed in matters of ownership, legal and technical aspects of ownership, or the local practices of renting out agricultural land. Such contracts and monetary transaction, affairs of joint property, the land revenue, permanent and non-permanent holdings etc. all these would be normally looked after the man of the house or adult children. Men generally kept the land deeds, the copies, maps, revenue receipts and such other important documents. In the urban areas, the men generally handle bank transactions, loans, land, property, cars etc. As looting and rampant arsons lay siege, such documents were irretrievably lost. Added on to the loss of husband, children and male guardians – the loss of important documents had a profound impact on the war-ravaged women. They faced an unimaginable crisis trying to come to terms with the complete ruin that stared them at them as they thought of the future.

Women had to seek help from door to door, often becoming prey to acquaintances that would take advantage of their vulnerability and con them. On occasions, they would make counterfeit deeds and evict war-ravaged families and women from their own property. Women who had already faced torture and incarceration for a long period of time would return to find their possessions and property no longer belonged to them. Neighbors connived and made it difficult for the Hindu families to return to their homesteads. Raped, tortured women and those who had been on the run to flee persecution were not welcomed back to their own motherland. They were forced to sell off all they owned at a nominal price and make off to India. A handful of them, who clung on to their land and homes, were to have had a devastating experience. One such woman was Biringona Khodeja Khatun from Patuakhali. The Pakistanis killed her husband. She was terror-stricken and had taken refuge at the house of a man who was a member of the Peace Committee. Khodeja was not aware that her host was collaborating with the Pakistani forces. Through his machinations, she had to endure months of abominable abuse at the hands of the brutal Pakistani. At one stage, she became pregnant. She lost the courage to go back to her own people knowing she would not be able to talk about her terrible ordeal.

Dr. M A Hasan

Convener, War Crimes Facts Finding Committee, Bangladesh
Tel. 88 02 8914506, Fax: 88 02 8913819, Mob.: 88 02 01817007921
E-mail: aaesci@aitbd.net

Though there had been some discussion of the rape of women, torture, the shame experienced by victims and their loneliness, these things have not been fully comprehended even by researchers, not to mention the average citizen. The reason is not only the failure to gather information at the right time or the lack of thorough research; the real reason is a limitation in our conception of truth.

What is truth? It is the reality born of our experience and is grasped by our common sense and then expressed in various ways. At least this is the easily cognizable common interpretation, unless we go in for a deep and critical analysis. When Socrates asked Thaetetus what is knowledge, the latter replied that it is our experience. But in reality, outside our experience lies a vast galaxy of truths. Besides, how well are we equipped to experience the truth of the terrible persecution of 1971? How much have the victimized women been able to express? How much have the witnesses who have testified been able to describe? There are limitations of language, of vocabulary, of the powers of sympathy and empathy, of the ability to express oneself.

Some of us are like ink and some like paper.

And if it were not for the blackness of some of us, some of us would be dumb;

And if it were not for the whiteness of some of us, some of us would be blind. - Kahlil Gibran