

Case Study: Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971

Summary

The mass killings in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1971 vie with the annihilation of the **Soviet POWs**, the **holocaust against the Jews**, and the **genocide in Rwanda** as the most concentrated act of genocide in the twentieth century. In an attempt to crush forces seeking independence for East Pakistan, the West Pakistani military regime unleashed a systematic campaign of mass murder which aimed at killing millions of Bengalis, and likely succeeded in doing so.

The background

East and West Pakistan were forged in the cauldron of independence for the Indian sub-continent, ruled for two hundred years by the British. Despite the attempts of Mahatma Gandhi and others to prevent division along religious and ethnic lines, the departing British and various Indian politicians pressed for the creation of two states, one Hindu-dominated (India), the other Muslim-dominated (Pakistan). The partition of India in 1947 was one of the great tragedies of the century. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in sectarian violence and military clashes, as Hindus fled to India and Muslims to Pakistan -- though large minorities remained in each country.

The arrangement proved highly unstable, leading to three major wars between India and Pakistan, and very nearly a fourth fullscale conflict in 1998-99. (**Kashmir**, divided by a ceasefire line after the first war in 1947, became one of the world's most intractable trouble-spots.) Not the least of the difficulties was the fact that the new state of Pakistan consisted of two "wings," divided by hundreds of miles of Indian territory and a gulf of ethnic identification. Over the decades, particularly after Pakistani democracy was stifled by a military dictatorship (1958), the relationship between East and West became progressively more corrupt and neo-colonial in character, and opposition to West Pakistani domination grew among the Bengali population.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman



Catastrophic floods struck Bangladesh in August 1970, and the regime was widely seen as having botched (or ignored) its relief duties. The disaster gave further impetus to the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The League demanded regional autonomy for East Pakistan, and an end to military rule. In national elections held in December, the League won an overwhelming victory across Bengali territory.

On February 22, 1971 the generals in West Pakistan took a decision to crush the Awami League and its supporters. It was recognized from the first that a campaign of genocide would be necessary to eradicate the threat: "Kill three

million of them," said President Yahya Khan at the February conference, "and the rest will eat out of our hands." (Robert Payne, *Massacre* [1972], p. 50.) On March 25 the genocide was launched. The university in Dacca was attacked and students exterminated in their hundreds. Death squads roamed the streets of Dacca, killing some 7,000 people in a single night. It was only the beginning. "Within a week, half the population of Dacca had fled, and at least 30,000 people had been killed. Chittagong, too, had lost half its population. All over East Pakistan people were taking flight, and it was estimated that in April some thirty million people [!] were wandering helplessly across East Pakistan to escape the grasp of the military." (Payne, *Massacre*, p. 48.) Ten million refugees fled to India, overwhelming that country's resources and spurring the eventual Indian military intervention. (The population of Bangladesh/East Pakistan at the outbreak of the genocide was about 75 million.)

On April 10, the surviving leadership of the Awami League declared Bangladesh independent. The Mukhta Bahini (liberation forces) were mobilized to confront the West Pakistani army. They did so with increasing skill and effectiveness, utilizing their knowledge of the terrain and ability to blend with the civilian population in classic guerrilla fashion. By the end of the war, the tide had turned, and vast areas of Bangladesh had been liberated by the popular resistance.

The gendecide against Bengali men

The war against the Bengali population proceeded in classic gendecidal 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 para-military 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.)

Mascarenhas's summary makes clear the linkages between gender and social class (the "intellectuals," "professors," "teachers," "office bearers," and -- obviously -- "militarymen" can all be expected to be overwhelmingly if not exclusively male, although in many cases their families died or fell victim to other atrocities alongside them). In this respect, the Bangladesh events can be classed as a combined gendecide and *elitocide*, with both strategies overwhelmingly targeting males for the most annihilatory excesses.

Bengali man and boys massacred by the West Pakistani regime.



Younger men and adolescent boys, of whatever social class, were equally targets. According to Rounaq Jahan, "All through the liberation war, able-bodied young men were suspected of being actual or potential freedom fighters. Thousands were arrested, tortured, and killed. Eventually cities and towns became bereft of young males who either took refuge in India or joined the liberation war." Especially "during the first phase" of the genocide, he writes, "young able-bodied males were the victims of indiscriminate killings." ("Genocide in Bangladesh," in Totten *et al.*, *Century of Genocide*, p. 298.) R.J. Rummel likewise writes that "the

Pakistan army [sought] out those especially likely to join the resistance -- young boys. Sweeps were conducted of young men who were never seen again. Bodies of youths would be found in fields, floating down rivers, or near army camps. As can be imagined, this terrorized all young men and their families within reach of the army. Most between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five began to flee from one village to another and toward India. Many of those reluctant to leave their homes were forced to flee by mothers and sisters concerned for their safety." (*Death By Government*, p. 329.) Rummel describes (p. 323) a chilling gendercidal ritual, reminiscent of Nazi procedure towards **Jewish males**: "In what became province-wide acts of genocide, Hindus were sought out and killed on the spot. As a matter of course, soldiers would check males for the obligated circumcision among Moslems. If circumcised, they might live; if not, sure death."

Robert Payne describes scenes of systematic mass slaughter around Dacca that, while not explicitly "gendered" in his account, bear every hallmark of classic gender-selective roundups and gendercidal slaughters of non-combatant men:

In the dead region surrounding Dacca,



the military authorities conducted experiments in mass extermination in places unlikely to be seen by journalists. At Hariharpara, a once thriving village on the banks of the Buriganga River near Dacca, they found the three elements necessary for killing people in large numbers: a prison in which to hold the victims, a place for executing the prisoners, and a method for disposing of the bodies. The prison was a large riverside warehouse, or godown, belonging to the Pakistan National Oil Company, the place of execution was the river edge, or the shallows near the shore, and the bodies were disposed of by the simple means of permitting them to float downstream. The killing took place night after night. Usually the prisoners were roped together and made to wade out into the river. They were in batches of six or eight, and in the light of a powerful electric arc lamp, they were easy targets, black against the silvery water. The executioners stood on the pier, shooting down at the compact bunches of prisoners wading in the water. There were screams in the hot night air, and then silence. The prisoners fell on their sides and their bodies lapped against the shore. Then a new bunch of prisoners was brought out, and the process was repeated. In the morning the village boatmen hauled the bodies into midstream and the ropes binding the bodies were cut so that each body drifted separately downstream. (Payne, *Massacre* [Macmillan, 1973], p. 55.)

Strikingly similar and equally hellish scenes are described in the case-studies of [genocide in Armenia](#) and [the Nanjing Massacre](#) of 1937.

Atrocities against Bengali women

As was also the case in [Armenia](#) and [Nanjing](#), Bengali women were targeted for gender-selective atrocities and abuses, notably gang sexual assault and rape/murder, from the earliest days of the Pakistani genocide. Indeed, despite (and in part because of) the overwhelming targeting of males for mass murder, it is for the systematic brutalization of women that the "Rape of Bangladesh" is best known to western observers.

In her ground-breaking book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Susan Brownmiller likened the 1971 events in Bangladesh to the Japanese rapes in Nanjing and German rapes in Russia during World War II. "... 200,000, 300,000 or possibly 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. ... Hit-and-run rape of large numbers of Bengali women was brutally simple in terms of logistics as the Pakistani regulars swept through and occupied the tiny, populous land ..." (p. 81).

Typical was the description offered by reporter Aubrey Menen of one such assault, which targeted a recently-married woman:

Two [Pakistani soldiers] went into the room that had been built for the bridal couple. The others stayed behind with the family, one of them covering them with his gun. They heard a barked order, and the bridegroom's voice protesting. Then there was silence until the bride screamed. Then there was silence again, except for some muffled cries that soon subsided. In a few minutes one of the soldiers came out, his uniform in disarray. He grinned to his companions. Another soldier took his place in the extra room. And so on, until all the six had raped the belle of the village. Then all six left, hurriedly. The father found his daughter lying on the string cot unconscious and bleeding. Her husband was crouched on the floor, kneeling over his vomit. (Quoted in Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, p. 82.)

"Rape in Bangladesh had hardly been restricted to beauty," Brownmiller writes. "Girls of eight and grandmothers of seventy-five had been sexually assaulted ... Pakistani soldiers had not only

violated Bengali women on the spot; they abducted tens of hundreds and held them by force in their military barracks for nightly use." Some women may have been raped as many as eighty times in a night (Brownmiller, p. 83). How many died from this atrocious treatment, and how many more women were murdered as part of the generalized campaign of destruction and slaughter, can only be guessed at (see below).

Despite government efforts at amelioration, the torment and persecution of the survivors continued long after Bangladesh had won its independence:

Rape, abduction and forcible prostitution during the nine-month war proved to be only the first round of humiliation for the Bengali women. Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman's declaration that victims of rape were national heroines was the opening shot of an ill-starred campaign to reintegrate them into society -- by smoothing the way for a return to their husbands or by finding bridegrooms for the unmarried [or widowed] ones from among his Mukti Bahini freedom fighters. Imaginative in concept for a country in which female chastity and purdah isolation are cardinal principles, the "marry them off" campaign never got off the ground. Few prospective bridegrooms stepped forward, and those who did made it plain that they expected the government, as father figure, to present them with handsome dowries. (Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, p. 84.)

How many died?

The number of dead in Bangladesh in 1971 was almost certainly well into seven figures. It was one of the worst genocides of the World War II era, outstripping Rwanda (800,000 killed) and probably surpassing even Indonesia (1 million to 1.5 million killed in 1965-66). As R.J. Rummel writes,

The human death toll over only 267 days was incredible. Just to give for five out of the eighteen districts some incomplete statistics published in Bangladesh newspapers or by an Inquiry Committee, the Pakistani army killed 100,000 Bengalis in Dacca, 150,000 in Khulna, 75,000 in Jessore, 95,000 in Comilla, and 100,000 in Chittagong. For eighteen districts the total is 1,247,000 killed. This was an incomplete toll, and to this day no one really knows the final toll. Some estimates of the democide [Rummel's "death by government"] are much lower -- one is of 300,000 dead -- but most range from 1 million to 3 million. ... The Pakistani army and allied paramilitary groups killed about one out of every sixty-one people in Pakistan overall; one out of every twenty-five Bengalis, Hindus, and others in East Pakistan. If the rate of killing for all of Pakistan is annualized over the years the Yahya martial law regime was in power (March 1969 to December 1971), then this one regime was more lethal than that of the Soviet Union, China under the communists, or Japan under the military (even through World War II). (Rummel, *Death By Government*, p. 331.)

The proportion of men versus women murdered is impossible to ascertain, but a speculation might be attempted. If we take the highest estimates for both women raped and Bengalis killed (400,000 and 3 million, respectively); if we accept that half as many women were killed as were raped; and if we double that number for murdered children of both sexes (total: 600,000), we are still left with a death-toll that is 80 percent adult male (2.4 million out of 3 million). Any such disproportion, which is almost certainly on the low side, would qualify Bangladesh as one of the worst gendricides against men in the last half-millennium.

Who was responsible?

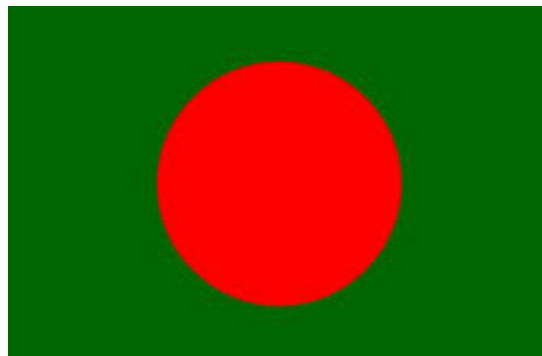
"For month after month in all the regions of East Pakistan the massacres went on," writes Robert Payne. "They were not the small casual killings of young officers who wanted to demonstrate their efficiency, but organized massacres conducted by sophisticated staff officers, who knew exactly what they were doing. Muslim soldiers, sent out to kill Muslim peasants, went about their work mechanically and efficiently, until killing defenseless people became a habit like smoking cigarettes or drinking wine. ... Not since Hitler invaded Russia had there been so vast a massacre." (Payne, *Massacre*, p. 29.)

There is no doubt that the mass killing in Bangladesh was among the most carefully and centrally planned of modern genocides. A cabal of five Pakistani generals orchestrated the events: President Yahya Khan, General Tikka Khan, chief of staff General Pirzada, security chief General Umar Khan, and intelligence chief General Akbar Khan. The U.S. government, long supportive of military rule in Pakistan, supplied some \$3.8 million in military equipment to the dictatorship *after* the onset of the genocide, "and after a government spokesman told Congress that all shipments to Yahya Khan's regime had ceased." (Payne, *Massacre*, p. 102.)

The genocide and gendercidal atrocities were also perpetrated by lower-ranking officers and ordinary soldiers. These "willing executioners" were fuelled by an abiding anti-Bengali racism, especially against the Hindu minority. "Bengalis were often compared with monkeys and chickens. Said Pakistan General Niazi, 'It was a low lying land of low lying people.' The Hindus among the Bengalis were as Jews to the Nazis: scum and vermin that [should] best be exterminated. As to the Moslem Bengalis, they were to live only on the sufferance of the soldiers: any infraction, any suspicion cast on them, any need for reprisal, could mean their death. And the soldiers were free to kill at will. The journalist Dan Coggin quoted one Punjabi captain as telling him, 'We can kill anyone for anything. We are accountable to no one.' This is the arrogance of Power." (Rummel, *Death By Government*, p. 335.)

The aftermath

On December 3, India under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, seeking to return the millions of Bengali refugees and seize an opportunity to weaken its perennial military rival, finally launched a fullscale intervention to crush West Pakistani forces and secure Bangladeshi independence. The Pakistani army, demoralized by long months of guerrilla warfare, quickly collapsed. On December 16, after a final genocidal outburst, the Pakistani regime agreed to an unconditional surrender. Awami leader Sheikh Mujib was released from detention and returned to a hero's welcome in Dacca on January 10, 1972, establishing Bangladesh's first independent parliament.



In a brutal bloodletting following the expulsion of the Pakistani army, perhaps 150,000 people were murdered by the vengeful victors. (Rummel, *Death By Government*, p. 334.) The trend is far too common in such post-genocidal circumstances (see the case-studies of [Rwanda](#), [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#), [Kosovo](#), and the [Soviet POWs](#)). Such largescale reprisal killings also tend to have a gendercidal character, which may have been the case in Bangladesh: Jahan writes that during the reprisal stage, "another group of Bengali *men* in the rural areas -- those who were coerced or

bribed to collaborate with the Pakistanis -- fell victims to the attacks of Bengali freedom fighters." ("Genocide in Bangladesh," p. 298; emphasis added.)

None of the generals involved in the genocide has ever been brought to trial, and all remain at large in Pakistan and other countries. Several movements have arisen to try to bring them before an international tribunal (see [Bangladesh links](#) for further information).

Political and military upheaval did not end with Bangladeshi independence. Rummel notes that "the massive bloodletting by all parties in Bangladesh affected its politics for the following decades. The country has experienced military coup after military coup, some of them bloody." (*Death By Government*, p. 334.)

[Source: http://www.gendercide.org/case_bangladesh.html]

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