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The Genocide Of 1971 In Bangladesh: The Politics Of Memory

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Abstract

Bangladesh has completed its 50th years of independence. However, Bangladesh's social, economic, and political levels have fluctuated greatly between 1947 and 1971, and from 1971 to the present. Bangladesh gained independence on December 16, 1971, after a nine-month violent liberation war with Pakistan. This war has left deep imprints on Bangladesh. The people of Bangladesh will never forget the Genocide. This sentiment is shared both inside and outside the country. Bangladesh's nine months story still has changed the character, pace, and prospects of life in the nation. In this article, an attempt has been made to look into the Genocide of Bangladesh in 1971- a significant South Asian nation which has witnessed one of the worst genocides in the late 20th century. This study will seek into the causes of the genocide and who was accountable for it. The paper also discuss over the politics of memory. This paper argues that Bangladesh's politics are still governed by the Genocide and War of 1971. It also discusses Bangladesh's recently established War Crime Tribunals.

Keywords

Genocide, Bangladesh, Liberation War, Mass Murder, International Crime Tribunal

Introduction

Bangladesh has gained independence in 1971, but at an incredibly high cost. With the beginning of 'Operation Searchlight' on the night of March 25, 1971 the West Pakistani military regime unleashed a preplanned campaign of mass murder to suppress the Bengali people's desire for independence. According to reports, at least 7,000 innocent people were killed in a single night and at least 30,000 in a week in Dhaka alone (Genocide Memorial Corner 2019). The Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

announced Bangladesh's independence on that very night. After that, he urged for civil disobedience and violent resistance against the junta of President Yahya Khan in West Pakistan. The Bangladeshi War of Liberation was fought the next few months between West Pakistan, which was unwavering in its possession of "East Pakistan," and Bengali nationalists eager to obtain independence despite political, economic, cultural, and linguistic suppression. The Pakistani military government then committed genocide against Bangladeshis from March 25 to December 16, 1971, while many Bangladeshis joined the Liberation War. The atrocities, on the other hand, had the exact opposite effect on Bengalis. Rather than being intimidated, they rose up in revolt and chose the path of armed resistance to military attack. The systematic use of rape and torture against the population was one of the distinguishing features of the Pakistani genocide in Bangladesh. It took nine months of bloody war to achieve the well cherished independence on 16 December 1971.

In an independent state, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the undisputed leader. Four years later, tragedy struck when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated and the military took power. Bangladesh remained under military authority for the following two decades, and every attempt was made to suppress both the memory and the legacy of 1971. Furthermore, the restoration of democracy and the election of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have ensured that the memories and legacy of the Liberation War Genocide not only survive, but also serve to inspire young Bangladeshis born after 1971. As a result, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has instituted an International War Crimes Tribunal to bring the perpetrators of the 1971 war accountable for international crimes such as genocide and war crimes against humanity. However, the process has been targeted by political opponents (Boissoneault, 2016). As, March 25 marked 51th anniversary of the one of the worst slaughters in a 20th century filled with slaughters up to 3 million killed, hundreds of thousands raped in the Bengali Hindu genocide. Meanwhile, the trial procedure for individuals accused of war crimes has already commenced in Dhaka.

From the above context, the paper provides a systematic study of Genocide in Bangladesh, as well as their impact on post war periods in nation. The systematic annihilation of the Bengali people by the Pakistani army during the Bangladesh Liberation War targeted Hindus and intellectuals, and approximately 400,000 women were raped and sexually enslavement. In addition, the paper attempts to explore the causes of the genocide and who was accountable for it. It also looks into the recent establishment of Bangladesh's War Crime Tribunals and discusses the memory of politics in Bangladesh.

Historical Background of the Bangladesh Genocide

After the partition of British India, the newly formed Pakistani state was viewed as a geographical abnormality, with a gap of over 1300 miles between its western and eastern parts. In 1947, the subcontinent was partitioned on religious grounds and it resulted in mass migration. During the process there was a lot of communal violence. Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country that was established in 1947. Priority was given

to religious affiliation. However, more than geography separated East Pakistani Muslims from West Pakistani Muslims: they also differed in language, ethnicity, and culture (Jahan, 2012). However, the East Pakistan (Bengali Muslims) very soon realised that, despite their numerical majority, they were discriminated and exploited in every aspect of life – social, political, and economic.

Political Discrimination: The relationship between the two wings of Pakistan, West and East, deteriorated after 1947. Despite the fact that the Eastern wing had a higher proportion of the overall population, and power was disproportionately concentrated in the Western wing (Christiansen, 2019). In West Pakistan, the government's headquarters were established. Furthermore, the political representation of different ethnic groups in the Central Government was not equal. Pakistan went through multiple years of military rule between 1947 and 1971, making it more difficult for ethnic minorities to obtain political power. Furthermore, nearly all of the key institutions, including the civil service, the military, and the overall administration of government, were occupied by West Pakistani elites groups of Punjabis (Haqqani, 2010). As a result, the dominating Punjabis had influence over state-owned organizations, governmental mechanisms, and the armed forces, resulting in severe economic exploitation of the East Wing. The distribution of various national resources, such as the financial budget and military troops, showed gross negligence towards the region, which had detrimental effects for the overall wellbeing and development of the Bengali populace.

Economic exploitation: Political power of Pakistan was concentrated in the West, and the government benefitted from the Eastern wing but did not invest enough in its development. In comparison to the Eastern Wing, the Western Wing had 25 times the military personnel. In reaction to the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, during which East Pakistan was left with a limited military defence, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman drew up the Six Point Demands¹ to express the demands for economic growth for the East Wing. It received significant support from the Eastern Wing, but was rejected by the Western Wing's political power.

Social Exploitation: In the Eastern wing of Pakistan the population of Muslim was in majority. Historically, in the Eastern Wing, members of all religions had always lived co-existed peacefully. West Pakistani elites viewed their eastern wing people as culturally and racially inferior, and an attempt to make Urdu the national language was seen as more indication that the government would disregard East Pakistan's interests (Boissoneault, 2016). The number of Bengali speakers, on the other hand, was higher than the number of Urdu speakers. Despite the fact that the two areas were united under the banner of religion, their religious interpretations of Islam were distinct to each other, and ethnic, linguistic, and cultural distinctions

¹ The Six Point Demands included the following- 1) Pakistan would have a federal structure of government in the spirit of the Lahore Resolution of 1940, with a parliament elected on the basis of a universal adult franchise, 2) The central government would have authority only in defence and foreign affairs, and all other subjects would be handled by the federating units of the state of Pakistan, and 3) There would be two freely convertible currencies for the two wings of Pakistan, or two separate reserve banks for the two regions of the country, 4) The federating units would be in charge of taxation and revenue collection; 5) The two wings of Pakistan would have separate accounts for foreign exchange reserves; and 6) East Pakistan would have a separate militia or paramilitary force as a measure of its security (Bangladesh Awami League, 2021).

overshadowed their shared religious identities. Western Pakistanis saw Bengali Muslims reading the Quran as inferior and impure, and harboured an intention of turning them into "exemplary Muslims" by separating them from their Hindu background (Ouassini and Quassini, 2019). The West Pakistani government was critical of the relationship about the intimacy between the Muslim and Hindu population in East Pakistan, seeing Bengalis as subordinate due to their social and cultural ties to Hindus. Prior to 1971, comprehensive serious discrimination against women was common, and domestic violence widespread (Saikia, 2011).

Due to such state's opposition the Bengali identity grew stronger, and religion the one unifying bond between East and West Pakistan, became less important. Thus, it is not surprising that it was the status of Bengali language that produced and mobilized East Pakistani political leaders, nationalists, intellectuals, and university students to petition for more representation and autonomy (Musa, 1996). In this regard, Rounaq Jahan (2005) argues that attacks on Bengali's language and culture separated them from Pakistan's state-sponsored Islamic doctrine and heightened their linguistic-ethnic identity, emphasizing a more secular worldview and attitude. And then, The AL, East Pakistan's Bengali nationalist party, won a landslide victory in the 1970 elections, which was not accepted by Pakistan's ruling elites. The non-cooperation movement began in March 1971, and the call for independence was not very far. The Pakistan Army then committed genocide on the people of the East Wing, which is still mourned as the dark nights of March 25, 1971 (Mascarenhas, 1971).

The term of Genocide: meaning

The United Nations was established in 1945 as a common international forum for the states to interact with one another in the peaceful resolution of international problems in order to maintain international peace and preventing wars. In Article 2 of the United Nations Genocide Convention, genocide defined as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group," as such: a) Killing group members; b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to group members; c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Raphael Lemkin, coined a word "genocide" in 1944. He was a refugee from Nazi Germany at the time, and coined a term "born from the Holocaust."² The initial concept of genocide was as such:

“Genocide is the crime of destroying national, racial or religious groups. The problem now arises as to whether it is a crime of only national importance, or a crime in which international society as such should be vitally interested. Many reasons speak for the second alternative. It would be impractical to treat genocide as a national crime, since by its very nature it is committed by the state or by powerful groups which have the backing of the state. A state would never prosecute a crime instigated or backed by itself.”

² Christian Gerlach, "Genocide and Mass Violence in Asia: An Introduction", pg 3.

As names like Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Bangladesh remind us, genocide has been a major scourge in human society for the past seventy years. As a result, the twentieth century is known as the "century of genocide" (Weitz, 2005).

Genocide of 1971 in Bangladesh

West Pakistan controlled political power after 1947. The military administration was forced to change its frontman after the countrywide uprising of 1968-69. General Yahya Khan, the junta's new commander, promised general elections and actually organised them in November 1970. Following, the electoral victory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's East Pakistan based Awami League in the 1970 elections, the Pakistani military used force to try to sway the outcome. They do not want an East-wing Prime Minister to rule over the entire country of Pakistan. Directly after Yahya Khan's indefinite postponement of the Constitutional Assembly meeting on March 1 due to political squabbles, many Bengalis felt that fraud was planned, and thousands of outraged Bengalis rushed to the streets. Violent clashes between demonstrators and the military began from March 2 onwards, especially when protesters attempted to storm certain government offices or blockade certain objects. According to pro-Bengali narratives, this sparked an unarmed passive resistance movement, but it was not peaceful (Jahan, 2004). Mujibur Rehman urged Bengalis to arm themselves and take up arms in the struggle. From March 1 to March 25, there were several violent actions resulting from rallies and demonstrations in various towns and cities, not just during clashes with the army. The transition between conventional political struggle and mass violence were fluent (Hari, 2020).

To achieve legitimacy, insurgents exploited deep seated intractable issues, insurgent action precipitated ethnic or religious violence, and force employed collective punishment. The genocide was primarily carried out to scare the people of East Pakistan into submission. The genocide in Bangladesh began on March 26, 1971, when the Pakistan government, dominated by West Pakistan, launched Operation Searchlight, a military crackdown on Bengali demands for self-determination in East Pakistan (Bangladesh Genocide Archive). The systematic deployment of genocidal violence by the Pakistani military and its associated militias against the Bengali masses was one of the distinguishing elements of the Bangladeshi War of Liberation.

Soon the Pakistan army expanded into the country's remotest areas. In retaliation, Bengali nationalists began organising resistance on March 26, following Bangladesh's declaration of independence. Further, the Pakistani government's military action was stepped up even more. The Pakistani army launched an undeclared war against Bangladesh's unarmed civilians. To contain the nationalist forces, they used warplanes and gunships. Hundreds of men, women, and children were slain and maimed indiscriminately in hundreds of villages, cities, and towns. Arson, rape, and pillage had no bounds. Because of fear and

intimidation, millions of Bengalis fled their homes and sought sanctuary in the Indian government's refugee camps near the border. As a result, the massacre continued until the Pakistan army surrendered on December 16, 1971.

The genocide was predominantly perpetrated by the Pakistani government, specifically the Yahya dictatorship. It chose a military solution to a constitutional crisis in addition to preventing the Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman from creating the federal administration. As a result, it decided to launch a violent military offensive against the Bengalis. Yahya's choice to appoint General Tikka Khan to lead the military operation in Bangladesh was a clear indication of the regime's intent to launch genocide (Jahan, 2005). In a bloody crackdown, the military tried to crush the autonomy movement and together with supportive local Muslim militias – including Biharis (many of whom acted as informants and also participated in riots in Dhaka and Chittagong), also Bengali conservatives killed, arrested, or expelled Awami League functionaries, students, pro-Bengali intellectuals, and Hindus (Jacob, 2019). Attacks on Biharis and rapes continued after that, as did a famine that may have caused more victims than direct violence, particularly among returning refugees (Gerlach, 2019).

The Pakistani army surrendered quickly after Bangladesh was liberated, and the Bangladesh government announced its intention to institute war crimes trials against the Pakistani army (Jahan, 2005). However, only 193 cops were charged with specific offences (out of the 93,000 soldiers within its ranks). In exchange for a negotiated settlement of unresolved disputes with Pakistan, Bangladesh later gave up the idea of war crime prosecutions. This included the release of Bengalis held captive in Pakistan, the repatriation of Biharis from Bangladesh to Pakistan, asset and liability partition, and recognition of Bangladesh (O'Donnell, 1984).

There were also Bengalis who collaborated with the Pakistani government. The Pakistani government deliberately recruited Bengali collaborators during the second phase of the freedom movement. Many Islamist political groups (Muslim League and Jamaat-i-Islami) opposed to the Awami League also collaborated with the army. Peace committees were formed in several cities and towns, and razakars (armed volunteers) were raised and given weaponry under their supervision to combat the independence fighters. During the 12-14 December 1971, two armed vigilantes groups (Al-Badr and Al-Shams) were trained and took the lead in the arrest and killing of the intellectuals. Some Bengali intellectuals were also recruited to carry out pro-Pakistan propaganda. There is no doubt the mass killings in Bangladesh was the most organised of modern genocides. After the genocide began, the US government, which had long supported military rule in Pakistan, sent \$3.8 million in military supplies to the dictatorship, "and after a government spokesman told Congress that all shipments to Yahya Khan's regime had ceased" (Payne, 1973).

The Pakistani Army occupied Bengali territory. According to reports, the military officer in charge of the Dhaka operations declared that he would kill four million people in 48 hours and thus put an end to the Bengal problem (Jahan, 1972). Because the Bengalis had no prior experience in armed conflict, the Pakistani

military regime calculated that they would be terrified and crushed in the face of tremendous weaponry, mass killings, and destruction. The genocide was not carried out only to scare the population and punish them for resisting. This act of genocide also contained racist undertones. The Pakistani army, consisting of mainly Punjabis and Pathans, has long regarded Bengalis as racially inferior — a non-martial, physically weak race with no desire or ability to serve in the army (Marshall, 1959).

According to Mascarenhas (1972), the massacred against the Bengali population was in classic genocidal manner. The genocide primarily targeted: (i) The Bengali military men of the East Bengal Regiment, the East Pakistan Rifles, police, and paramilitary Ansars and Mujahids; (ii) Hindus; (iii) Awami Leaguers - all office bearers and volunteers down to the lowest link in the chain of command; and (iv) The students of college and university boys and some of the more militant girls; (v) Bengali intellectuals. Of course, it turned out that the Pakistan Army was just as cruel to everyone else who got in the path of their prime targets being eliminated.

Bangladesh and the Memory of Politics

After four decades of independence, Bangladesh has re-started a domestic war crimes trial procedure that contains own power dynamics. The AL government established an International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in 2010 to prosecute war crimes committed during the 1971 liberation war. In the 40 years since the liberation war, the Bangladeshi people's desire for justice the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people for justice have remained captive to a political battle for power and constant rewriting of history, allowing important perpetrators of such crimes to elude punishment. While, in the years following the war, the inevitable struggle for power, divisions among liberation leaders, and governments' heavy reliance on political and economic alliances allowed conservative groups that collaborated with Pakistan during the 1971 war to re-establish a power base and limited legitimacy.

The ongoing power battle between the ruling Awami League (AL) and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) arose in this setting. Sheikh Hasina, the leader of the AL and Bangladesh's current prime minister, is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was assassinated in 1975. The AL, which is essentially center-left and secularist, was strongly involved in the Liberation War of 1971. Khalida Zia, the BNP's leader, is the widow of former president and major general Ziaur Rahman, who was killed in 1981. In the liberation war, Ziaur Rahman was in active battle. In 1978, the BNP formed a new political alliance, a centre-right party that has been in formal collaboration with the Islamist parties Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh and Oikyo Jote since 2000. President Mujibur Rehman and much of his family were assassinated in 1975, and his daughter, current Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina, blames ruler Ziaur Rehman, for sowing the seeds of AL-BNP hatred that still exists today. In addition, societal divisions in Bangladesh have deepened.

The ICT held its first hearing on July 26, 2010, after which it issued arrest warrants for four of the accused: Motiur Rahman Nizami, Abul Qader Mollah, Muhammad Kamruzzaman, and Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mujahid. In March 2012, the AL-led government constituted a second tribunal in order to complete the cases before the end of its tenure. Nine Jammāt-e-Islami leaders and two BNP members have been charged with war crimes. Three Jammāt leaders were tried initially, and all three were found guilty. Abul Kalam Azad was prosecuted in his absence since he had fled the country, and he was sentenced to death in January 2013. Abdul Quader Molla, Jammāt's Assistant Secretary General, was the first person sentenced to death by ICT who was not convicted in absentia in February 2013. Molla was originally sentenced to life imprisonment however, protests particularly the 2013 Shahbagh protests in Dhaka, resulted in a revised sentence.

The Shahbagh movement began in February 2013, with demands for capital penalty for war offenders and a ban on Jammāt. The Hefazat-e-Islam responded with a counter-offensive. It held massive protests in Chittagong and elsewhere, portraying the Shahbagh protestors as atheists, including on 3 May 2013 in the capital, which police violently dispersed. Hefazat's propaganda was added grist by Mollah's hanging in December. The ICT, the Shahbagh movement, and the executions of prominent clerics provided the group a new campaign with a greater popularity than its previous agenda, which centered on restricting women's freedom, including a work ban. Its growing popularity was also a sign of growing Islamist influence in rural areas. In negotiations for end the Hefazat protests, the AL government agreed, among other concessions, to abandon reforms aimed at regulating the qaumi madrasa sector.

The AL's return to power has prompted a new attempt at conducting war trials for the protagonists, the majority of whom are Jamaat-e-Islami members. However, when it strives to bring about delayed justice for wrongs committed four decades ago, the government has to contend with time deadlines, inconsistencies between local and international law, and other issues (D'Costa and Alamgir, 2011). In this context, according to Bergman (2016) in the short term, the proposed genocide statute could benefit the Awami League politically. But restricting free expression for sectarian political reasons is hazardous to democracy in the long term.

Further, International human rights organisations have been also denounced the trials as an extension of Bangladesh's political-religious struggle for power. Human Rights Watch, which initially advocated fairness and transparency, also reported harassment of defence lawyers and witnesses. There remains a substantial lack of the trials the second judgement was effectively viewed as a "get out of prison free card," either as soon as the AL is voted out of power or as soon as some other form of political settlement between the AL and Jamaat takes place behind the scenes (D'Costa, 2013).

Violence was introduced in Bangladeshi society, politics, and culture is a major impact of the genocide. Bangladesh's attempt to interpret the brutalities of 1971 has been mostly couched in narratives nationalist glory for the last five decades (Alagir and D'costa, 2011). The genocide, looting, burning and raping also brutalized Bangladeshi society. People appeared to have developed a larger tolerance for wanton aggression after watching so much violence (Rahman, 2005). The prominent feature in genocide was a lot of sexual violence, especially rape. Bengali women were abducted and forced into prostitution. Following the genocide, women's standing was also affected. Thousands of women were driven to seek wage work after sudden loss of male protection. Women entered occupations that were previously closed to them, including as public works programmes, rural extension work, civil administration, and the police force, for the first time. Violence against women has also become more pervasive and common.

In addition, eight to ten million people fled the country to seek refuge in India as a result of the conflict. According to estimates, up to 30 million civilians were internally displaced out of a total of 70 million, and up to 400,000 women raped. Millions of people had to start over again their lives and houses from scratch. There was ethnic violence between Bengalis and Urdu-speaking Biharis during the war. The Hindu community has not felt safe in Bangladesh since 1971, and many of them have decided not to return. After 1971, students and teenagers who had been familiar with the use of weapons did not give up. They began to settle political scores with sophisticated weapons. College and university campuses have become some of the most dangerous places in the country due to ongoing armed violence between opposing student groups. As a result, academic atmosphere and educational institution standards have been disrupted.

Past atrocities against communities raise a host of new explanatory dilemmas about the practises and consequences of physical and psychological trauma, memory's accountability, the manifestation or expression of guilt and shame, and concerns around giving witness and personal testimony. As the history of Bangladesh shows, dealing with the past raises many problems about the link between memory politics and state identity. Such considerations are critical for Bangladesh, which is coming to grips with its past and improving the resolve and ability of its society to combat and prevent future political violence and injustice. Unspeakable violence against men, women, and children must not be overlooked or forgotten because it has had a profound and long-lasting influence on society (D'Costa, 2013).

Additionally, the ICT is a retributive justice mechanism, and there has been no concurrent mechanism in Bangladesh that could upload restorative justice and focus on healing a society that has been terribly wounded throughout its four decades of sovereign life. The International Crimes Tribunal was established following the Awami League's electoral victory in 2008 that the issues of the 1971 crimes attracted renewed attention from the world, including major players (Farhad, 2018). In this context, the Bangladesh Parliament's decision in March 2017 to declare March 25 as Genocide Remembrance Day is a significant step forward. However, this is where the difficult task of gaining international recognition begins.

In short, from 1971 to present, through the political parties' war crime trials initiatives have began and discontinued. Finally, it is clear that there is a political motive behind this trial. First trial had stopped after Sheikh Mujib was killed. Further, Zia supported the Jamaat political party during in his period. When Sheikh Hasina returned to power in 1996, she took the initiative again for the war crimes trial, but her term was finished without any progress, and Khalida Zia took over in 2001 and the trial initiatives were halted by the BNP government. When AL came to power in 2008, it took the initiative on the war crimes trials. Some scholars viewed it as a political trial rather than a trial for justice, and there were numerous pitfalls and limitations in achieving an international standard (Houque, 2016; Jalil, 2010).

In Bangladesh, several governments came to power, but none of them really took any steps to prosecute war criminals until 2009. Though, several civil society organisations, cultural organisations, and families of war victims demanded that war criminals be tried. Before the ninth general election in 2008, this movement was stronger, and it was one of the AL's main manifestos, with 14 party allies (D'Cost and Hossain, 2010). The AL won the election. For the trial of war crimes, the new government took the initiative again.

Conclusion

Though the Bangladesh's Liberation War lasted only nine months, but it is deeply embedded in the country's political and cultural imagination of Bangladesh. Bangladesh believes that the event symbolised both genocidal killings and the birth of a new nation. Bangladeshis will never forget what they went through during at that time, and how much they suffered through the atrocities done by Pakistan's ruthless dictatorship. The people of Bangladesh are an inspiration and source of strength for those who want to say 'Never Again' against genocide. The war is remembered in Bangladesh as the Bengali people's struggle against an oppressive Pakistani army. Bangladesh Genocide Memorial Day is a national day commemorating the victims of the Bengali genocide of 1971, which was approved unanimously in 2017. In Bangladeshi society the memories surrounding the genocide shapes the contemporary political, economic, and social systems. Finally, in the nation must be a safe environment that encourages critical and reflective thinking.

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