

Anatomy of Violence

Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971

While events of 1971 continue to evoke strong emotion in both Pakistan and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), there has been little systematic study of the violent conflicts that prevailed in the course of the nine-month long civil war. Popular attention has, thus far, focused on the Pakistani army's action against the Bengalis, or on the India-Pakistan war. However, East Pakistan in 1971 was simultaneously a battleground for many different kinds of violent conflict that included militant rebellion, mob violence, military crackdown on a civilian population, urban terrorism to full-scale war between India and Pakistan. The culture of violence fomented by the conflict of 1971 forms the context for much of Bangladesh's subsequent history. A careful, evidence-based approach to understanding the events of 1971 is vital if the different parties to the conflict are to be ever reconciled.

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*"ham ke Thehre ajnabi itni madaaraaton ke baad
phir banein ge aashna kitni mulaaqaaton ke baad
kab nazar mein aaye gi be daagh sabze ki bahaar
khood ke dhabe dhulein ge kitni barsaaton ke baad"*
(‘Dhaka se waapsi par’, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 1974)

(We have become strangers after so much expression of affection
How many meetings will it take before we become friends again
When shall we be able to see the beauty of unblemished green
How many monsoons will it take to wash away its patches of blood
– ‘On Returning from Dhaka’)

I Introduction

The Many Conflicts of 1971

“This must be the only country in the world where there are two views on the independence of the country”. (Iqbal, former *Muktijoddha*, Dhaka)

1971 in south Asia usually denotes the third major war between India and Pakistan, in the context of a civil war in Pakistan which led to the secession of East Pakistan and the formation of a new country, Bangladesh. The cold war served as the international backdrop to this regional conflict.

However, the conflicts played out on the soil of East Pakistan in 1971 were more numerous and ran deeper. The civil war was not merely between the two wings of Pakistan, but also within the territory of East Pakistan, between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, and among Bengalis themselves, who were bitterly divided between those who favoured independence for Bangladesh and those who supported the unity and integrity of Pakistan. The middle ground of federation and autonomy was increasingly squeezed between these two highly polarised positions, especially through the general elections of December 1970.¹

Non-Bengali Muslims from the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who had migrated to East Pakistan (East Bengal) after the partition of India were collectively referred to as “Biharis” by the Bengalis.² Pro-liberation Bengalis assumed these non-Bengalis to be in favour of united Pakistan. But a significant minority of Bengalis, including the religious parties, was also for unity. In addition, many Bengalis who voted for Sheikh Mujib out of a long-standing sense of alienation and a desire for provincial autonomy, may not have been in favour of outright secession. The profound polarisation of politics reached even into individual Bengali families, dividing some of them horizontally – for example the father, who had experienced the creation of Pakistan, supported united Pakistan, while the son, swayed by the oratory of Sheikh Mujib, joined the fight for an independent Bangladesh. The internal battles among Bengalis in East Pakistan in 1971 are still playing out in the current politics of Bangladesh.

While 1971 evokes strong emotion in both parts of the severed wings of Pakistan, there has been little systematic study of the violent conflicts during the nine-month long civil war.³ Popular attention has focused on the Pakistani armed force's action against the Bengalis, or the India-Pakistan war. However, East Pakistan in 1971 was simultaneously a battleground for many different kinds of violent conflict – militant rebellion, mob violence, military crackdown on a civilian population, mutiny within the armed forces, urban terrorism, guerrilla warfare, conventional battles, death squads, civil war within Pakistan and between Bengalis, and full-scale war between Pakistan and India.

II Rules of Engagement

Studying the war poses vast and complex problems. It lasted close to a year, involved multiple combatant parties and different levels of conflict. It happened 34 years ago and its memory is

still riddled with bitterness and contradictory claims. Archival material from key players is not available. A comprehensive account would demand an institutional effort of national proportions, which Bangladesh has not done. Yet a “law of averages” approach does not work, as there was great variation in the experience of the conflict in different areas and at different times.

This paper presents a systematic analysis of the context and nature of violence in the conflict of 1971 using in-depth case studies of several specific incidents, drawn from my ongoing project ‘1971: Images, Memory, Reconciliation’. The case studies are from different districts, different moments of the time-line of the conflict, and involve different groups of perpetrators and victims. The focus is on the civil war – between pro-liberation and pro-unity groups, rather than the war between India and Pakistan, though India’s heavy involvement on the pro-liberation side blurs that distinction to an extent. In-depth examination at the micro-level provides a better understanding of its complexities and humanises the war. The study uses multiple sources of information and includes all parties to build as complete a picture as possible.

The case studies are therefore “representative” of the conflict, though not comprehensive. They were selected after discussion with several Bangladeshis with a keen interest in the war, almost all strongly “pro-liberation”, complemented by instances suggested by researching published material from all sides. They include mob violence in early March in Khulna and Chittagong, military action on March 25-26 in Dhaka University student halls and faculty residences, army attack on Shankharipara in old Dhaka on March 26, mutiny in Mymensingh, Bengali-Bihari violence in Khulna at different times, such as Bengali attacks against “Biharis” in March, “Bihari” attacks on Bengalis subsequently and Bengali “revenge” after independence, Bengali-non-Bengali violence in Chittagong and Bogra areas, rebel resistance in Tangail, mass killings by the army in Rajshahi and Mymensingh, army killing of Hindu refugees in Khulna, killing of intellectuals in Dhaka in December and “revenge” killings by the winning side after the end of the war. The compilation is ongoing.

The paper uses data collected during 2003-05 in Pakistan and Bangladesh from site visits, interviews with survivors, eyewitnesses and participants, and related material such as images and published and unpublished eyewitness accounts and memoirs (in English and Bengali).

The approach in the project, and in this paper, is “reconciliation”. This refers partly to reconciliation among people. In the absence of any institutional “truth and reconciliation” effort, participants in the 1971 conflict remain bitterly divided, in denial to a significant degree, and without “closure” in numerous instances. However, “reconciliation” also refers to the reconciliation of fact with fiction, using a non-partisan, evidence-based approach towards a conflict whose accounts are still driven by bitter emotional partisanship. They provide the basis for an analysis that challenges both the silence and the unsubstantiated rhetoric that have obscured the study of the conflict of 1971 to date.

The paper is organised in the following manner. Section III elaborates on the chronology and typology of violence in the conflict of 1971 with illustrative examples from the case studies. Section IV discusses some of the preliminary findings on the patterns that emerge. As the project is ongoing, the illustrative examples are only taken from completed parts of the case studies, and the findings must necessarily be termed preliminary until the work is completed.

III Chronology and Typology of Violence

“The real question is whether anybody can run the god-damn place.”
(President Nixon, phone conversation with Kissinger, March 29, 1971)⁴

Call to Arms: The Bengali Nationalist Rebellion

“There are two basic problems here”, wrote Henry Kissinger in a secret memo to President Nixon on March 13, 1971, “(1) Rahman has embarked on a Gandhian-type non-violent non-cooperation campaign which makes it harder to justify repression; and (2) the West Pakistanis lack the military capacity to put down a full-scale revolt over a long period.”⁵

Kissinger was right about the second point, but dead wrong about the first. The rebel movement in East Pakistan led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman bore no resemblance to the path of non-violence advocated by Gandhi against British rule in India. Despite some rhetorical calls for restraint, the movement was openly, and proudly, armed and militant. Personal memoirs of the time recount large public meetings in Dhaka since March 1, with the crowds carrying bamboo sticks and iron rods, calls to “take up arms”, incidents of bomb-throwing and shooting, and military-style parades carrying weapons both real and dummy. Images of such gatherings and parades are displayed with pride in the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka. Some aspects of the movement are similar to the violent revolutionary movement in Bengal against British rule in early 20th century and the 1930s, not Gandhian non-violence.⁶

Kaliranjan Shil, a Communist Party activist who survived the army’s assault on Jagannath Hall in Dhaka University on March 25-26, has written about the training for armed revolt, (using dummy rifles, according to him), that started on the university gymnasium field as soon as the parliament session was postponed on March 1. Each trained batch would then train arriving recruits, while “normal” students left the halls as the university was closed. He had trained as usual on March 25.⁷

Mob Violence by Bengalis against Non-Bengalis

The postponement of the national assembly on March 1 followed by the call to observe “hartal” given by Sheikh Mujib led to widespread lawlessness during March, when the Pakistan government effectively lost control of much of the territory of East Pakistan. Many accounts, both Bangladeshi and Pakistani, have recorded the parallel government run on Sheikh Mujib’s decrees.

Apart from sporadic incidents of violence in Dhaka, there was arson, looting and attacks by Bengali mobs on non-Bengali people and property in many parts of the province, some with casualties. The White Paper published by the Pakistan government in August 1971 lists such incidents, of which the worst loss of life appears to have occurred in Khulna and Chittagong in the first week of March. That “the government’s writ had ceased to function in most parts of the province” and that there were attacks upon non-Bengalis by Bengalis on the rampage, is acknowledged by critics of the government too.⁸

Most of these attacks were on civilians and commercial properties, but some were directly on the army, which remained curiously unresponsive under orders. Mostly the army suffered

from the refusal of Bengalis to sell them food and fuel, being jeered and spat at, and the widespread disregard of curfew orders, but some encounters were more deadly. "The murder of army personnel, caught in ones and twos, became an everyday occurrence", writes Major General H A Qureishi, "In our area we lost Lt Abbas of 29 Cavalry. With an escort of Bengali soldiers, he had ventured out of the unit lines to buy fresh vegetables for the troops. The escort was "rushed" by the militants, the officer was killed, weapons were "confiscated" and the Bengali members of the guard sent back unharmed."⁹ Even Anthony Mascarenhas, the Pakistani journalist who became famous for his condemnation of the military action, wrote, "It speaks volumes for the discipline of the West Pakistan army, that its officers were able to keep the soldiers in check during what was to them a nightmare of 25 days."¹⁰

The failure of the Awami League leadership in this respect – its inability or unwillingness to control a population it had incited, and encouraged to break the law – was matched by the failure of the regime to respond appropriately to attacks on life and property.

Military Action: Operation Searchlight

The extraordinary restraint of the army under provocation was totally reversed with the launch of military action with "Operation Searchlight" during the night of March 25-26. The operation was aimed at both Dhaka and the rest of the province and included the arrest of political leaders, disarming of potentially disloyal Bengali personnel in the police and army, and crushing the militant rebellion by force. Two of the target areas in Dhaka were Dhaka University, considered by the government to be the hotbed of militants, and parts of old Dhaka. In the action in the university, I draw a distinction between the attack on student halls and that on faculty quarters.

(i) Attack on Dhaka University student halls: In the usual Bangladeshi depiction, the army is accused of attacking the student halls and killing unarmed students. For instance, Kaliranjan Shil, the survivor from Jagannath Hall, describes the residents as "nirastra" – unarmed – despite his own description of their "training" and the arrival of trainees from elsewhere, in the same account.¹¹ However, a recording of army communications during the attack, made by a Bengali and made available to me by the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, supports the army version of a two-way battle, but reveals it to have been a very unequal one, with .303 rifle fire from the student halls, and no evidence of automatic weapons or grenades.¹²

A vivid description of the attack on Jagannath Hall given to me by an eyewitness, Rabindra Mohan Das, who lived in the staff quarters on the grounds, corroborates the massive use of force by the army, and also the killing of unarmed staff. According to Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Kamal Matinuddin's account, the officer in overall command of this attack – then Brigadier Jehanzeb Arbab – admitted "over-reaction and over-kill by the troops under his command".¹³

The Bengali nationalist narrative suffers from a contradiction in this instance. The pride taken in militant defiance of the military regime and readiness to take up arms for the Bengali cause is negated by the parallel claim of unarmed, passive students gunned down as they slept.

The regime's side of the story is not a tidy one either. The execution of "Operation Searchlight" on March 25-26 by the newly arrived Governor General Tikka Khan, was condemned

by Lt Gen A A K Niazi, who arrived in April as commander of the Eastern Command, as a violation of the mission and equivalent to the Jallianwalabagh massacre in the Punjab by the British in 1919. He said it made his task of regaining control of the province infinitely harder by provoking widespread mutiny among Bengali officers and men and turning virtually the entire population hostile.¹⁴

Wide differences in approach are evident throughout the ranks. In the communications recorded during the night's operations, one officer wonders how to feed his prisoners, while another reports that he has taken no prisoners. Nazrul Islam, then a student at the Art College, has written about how one group of soldiers shot him and two others in their hostel next to the EPR camp on March 26, only to be followed by a second group of soldiers who expressed shock that they had been shot, gave them water and encouraged the two of them still alive to seek help and live.¹⁵ (ii) Killing of Dhaka University faculty: During the attack on the university, several faculty members and adult male members of their family were dragged out of their apartments and shot. This must necessarily be placed in a different category from the battle at the student halls. Eyewitness accounts of the case of one of the victims, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, is provided by Guhathakurta himself – he lived for four days before succumbing to his injuries, as well as the memoirs of his wife and the testimony of his daughter to me.

In a confusing pattern, while soldiers attempted to break down the doors to all apartments, two out of the five faculty members then residing in the same building were killed while the other three were not.¹⁶ In response to my question whether the army had a specific list of faculty members they were looking for, the then secretary of the National Security Council, Major General Ghulam Umar, expressed his view that there was no specific list.¹⁷ However, the Guhathakurta family testifies to an officer asking for a specific person by name. Guhathakurta said that he was asked his name and religion before being shot. The other faculty killed was Maniruzzaman, along with his son, nephew and another young man from his apartment.¹⁸

The leader of the Bengali nationalist movement, Sheikh Mujib, was arrested from his home the same night. Most of his colleagues escaped to India. The anomalous result was that certain university professors were killed while political leaders were detained alive.

(iii) Attack on areas of old Dhaka: The attack on March 26 on areas of old Dhaka like Shankharipara, a single narrow lane specialising in the "shankha" (conchshell) business, has yet to yield a clear reason for its targeting, unless the fact of it being a Hindu business area was the sole reason. US consul-general in Dhaka, Archer Blood, sent a situation report on March 27, citing the Indian deputy high commissioner's view of a "large number of casualties" in this area. Mascarenhas has written, without citing any source: "In Shankaripatti an estimated 8,000 men, women and children were killed when the army, having blocked both ends of the winding street, hunted them down house by house."¹⁹ This description is entirely false.

Survivors of the attack on Shankharipara on March 26 testify that about 14 men and one child (carried by his father) were killed inside a single house that day – an unexplained and terrifying incident, but a different event from the one claimed above. The father and child who were killed – Chandhan and Buddhadev Sur – are one of my case studies. The soldiers did not go house to house. Other residents who remained inside their homes survived and within a couple of days everyone fled the area,

mostly to go to India, returning only after the independence of Bangladesh.²⁰

Mutiny

The military action on March 25-26 was followed by a wave of mutiny of Bengali officers and men in the army and police forces.²¹ The pattern of violence during the mutiny varied from place to place. With regard to the mutiny at the EPR cantonment at Mymensingh on March 27, local Bengalis spoke of a fierce gunfight in which a number of West Pakistani officers and men were killed, women assaulted and abducted and any man trying to escape lynched by the assembled population.²²

The then Major (later president) Ziaur Rahman declared the independence of Bangladesh over the radio. His West Pakistani commanding officer at 8 East Bengal Regiment was killed. Major Khaled Musharraf (who briefly took power during the coup and counter-coup in 1975) of 4 East Bengal placed his West Pakistani superior officers under arrest and handed them over to India. In these early days of open civil war, the fighting, and dying, for both causes – the independence of Bangladesh and the unity of Pakistan – was borne heavily by men in uniform, who had turned against each other.

Bengali officers who defected to the cause of liberation appear to have had a clearer idea of the gravity and risk of what they were undertaking than many civilian volunteers who joined the “Muktibahini”. For instance, Major General K M Safiullah, then second-in-command of 2 East Bengal Regiment, writes, “We had taken the oath of a soldier. The one and only punishment for breaking that oath and rebelling was to face the firing squad, i.e., death. There had to be an appropriate reason for rebelling, and we did it because there was one.”²³ In contrast, many accounts of civilians who took up arms against the state express shock and indignation at the prospect of capture and execution.

Mob Attacks and Post-Military Action

The launching of army action was also followed by another wave of mob violence, in which Bengali mobs slaughtered Biharis or West Pakistanis wherever they held the upper hand, until army units arrived and secured the area.²⁴ Most of the territory remained in rebel hands after March 25 and it took several weeks for the army to regain control.

One such slaughter of a very large number of Bihari men, women and children occurred at the Crescent Jute Mills in Khulna on March 27-28. According to local Bengali workers at the mill, at the time both Bengali and Bihari workers and their families were barricaded inside the mill compound, to prevent the army from entering. Sporadic violence had occurred between the two communities throughout March, and Awami League supporters among the Bengalis had been training and holding parades. A “truce” agreement had been made, but did not hold. Two Bengali policemen who had come by river with their weapons and a few locals who had guns first shot at the Biharis and then the Bengali mob massacred the fleeing Biharis with ‘da’s (cleavers) and other weapons. The bodies were dumped in the river.²⁵ Similar killings of non-Bengalis by Bengalis from late March to late April are also reported in many other parts of the province and a vicious cycle of Bengali-Bihari ethnic violence continued even after Bangladesh’s independence.²⁶

First Battles between Army and Rebels

As the army moved to secure the territory of East Pakistan and re-establish the writ of the government, initial resistance by Bengali rebels was disorganised and amateurish, while the army’s reaction was overwhelming. In an incident described by local villagers as the first battle between rebel forces and the army outside Dhaka, for instance, a group of Bengali ex-army and police personnel attempted to resist the army as it moved north from Dhaka to Tangail. They set up their position at a small village called Satiarchora. According to a villager who possessed a gun and took part, only a few villagers were involved and the Bengali side was caught unprepared and by surprise in the early hours of April 3 by a substantial convoy of the Pakistan army rolling their way. Though the army is said to have taken some casualties, the rebel ambush was crushed by its mightily superior force, with the army shooting “anything that moved” and torching the village.²⁷

In a fascinating parallel, Major General A O Mitha, the legendary founder of the Special Services Group (SSG) who was specially recalled to East Pakistan in late-March-early April, writes about an instance when flying along the route taken by a brigade, “I noticed that in many of the villages near the road, almost all the huts were burnt...” When asked about this, the brigadier (Arbab, moving out of Dhaka into the countryside) said he had faced little resistance, but adopted a policy of “prophylactic fire” on the advice of General Tikka Khan. General Mitha writes that General Tikka denied giving any such advice, whereupon he had him come over to the site at once to tell the brigadier so.²⁸

Mass Killings during “Pacification”

Throughout April and into May, the army continued to bring rebel-held territories back under the writ of the government. The pattern of ‘pacification’ had some common features, yet the outcome could differ startlingly from case to case. An example is the army operation to regain control of two security forces installations that had been taken over by rebel forces in the district of Rajshahi, in an area at the border with India.

As the army closed in on the first installation, the rebels vacated it and mingled with the villagers in the adjoining village, which is located by a river at the border with India. For reasons unfathomable, a couple of them took potshots at the advancing units in the bazaar. This triggered an overwhelming reaction from the army, which not only killed the two who had shot at them, but rounded up all the villagers, along with the outsiders among them, who had collected by the river bank.

In what appears to have been a pattern during this phase of army operations, a junior officer was in charge on the ground, while remaining in communication with superior officers elsewhere. Women and children were separated from adult men and sent back to the village. The men were then questioned in an attempt to identify ex-police, armed rebels, or Indian infiltrators, and anyone so suspected was summarily executed. However, at some point the officer appeared to receive an order from superior officers to kill all the men present, including, in this case, villagers who were entirely uninvolved in the fighting. The bodies were then stacked and set on fire. In contrast to this grisly outcome, another unit which went along the river to the second installation, secured it without killing villagers.²⁹ The difference underlines

the need for a deeper probe into the disregard for human life or due process that characterised the mass killing.

Hounding of Hindus

The minority Hindus, perceived by many in government, the armed forces, as well as the majority population as pro-India and a traitorous force within the country, were in a particularly vulnerable position during the civil war. Many Hindu villagers in Khulna, for instance, spoke of their harassment at the hands of local Muslims, which got serious enough for them to seek refuge in India. Thousands of them collected what belongings they could and went by boat to a village called Chuknagar, from where they went by road towards the Indian border. At Chuknagar they were relieved of their boats and much of their belongings by local Muslims, usually for a pittance or nothing.

The harassment, hounding out, and dispossession of the Hindus in this area took a turn for the worse on May 20. On that day, according to numerous eyewitnesses and survivors, a small unit of the armed forces, comprising only 20-25 men, arrived from the direction of Jessore and killed a very large number of adult male Hindu refugees among the thousands thronging the river bank and bazaar of Chuknagar. Once again, women and children were not harmed. Upon the departure of the unit, large-scale looting of the refugees' belongings, cash and jewellery, appears to have been conducted by the locals, who disposed of the bodies by throwing them into the river.³⁰

US consul-general in Dhaka, Archer Blood, received reports about attacks on Hindu men around the same time. His reassessment of the situation was: "... as Bengali resistance increased in the countryside, and a situation of civil war was approached, we realised that the term "genocide" was not appropriate to characterise all killings of Muslim Bengalis. Atrocities were being committed on both sides...It seemed to us that Army violence was increasingly being used for military purposes, i e, to secure control of the countryside." However, Blood felt that the term could be applied to the selective targeting of Hindu men. He had no explanation for it except to say that the Pakistan military seemed unable to distinguish between Indians and East Pakistani Hindus.³¹

Urban Terrorism

As monsoon passed into fall, groups of young Bengali men trained in camps in India returned to East Pakistan on a programme of sabotage. A number of them were involved in bombings and shootings in Dhaka. Their stories are reminiscent in part of the underground militant movement in Bengal directed against symbols of British rule. The targets of sabotage and opportunistic killings of army or police personnel are also reminiscent of the more contemporary urban terror of extreme Leftist militants called "Naxalites" in Indian Bengal.³² Many of these Bengali youths were captured, killed or disappeared, but many survived to tell their stories. They reveal highly idealistic, but rather amateur activities, with a high degree of division and betrayal.³³

Collective Punishment

In the absence of any political dialogue, the war dragged on at multiple levels – guerrilla war and sabotage by Bengali rebels trained and equipped by India, as well as increasing direct

involvement of Indian armed forces. In this context, in an incident on October 13 at Boroitola near Kishoreganj town in Mymensingh district, Pakistan army units arrived by train, rounded up adult men from neighbouring villages and, for reasons yet unclear, lined them up in two queues and gunned them down with what appears to have been light machine guns on stands. Villagers from one particular village were allowed to leave, following a conversation between their (loyalist) leader and the officer in charge.

The trigger for the army's arrival may have been the blowing up of a bridge nearby the previous day, or information provided by an informant in the village, or the fact that the area was the home village of Syed Nazrul Islam, the president of Bangladesh's government-in-exile in India. There is some evidence that the army may have initially come for a different purpose which changed upon receiving local information on the spot. Whatever it was, the manner of the killing suggests a public example of collective punishment or vengeance, without regard for due process or human life.³⁴

Death Squads

In the final days before the end of the war in December 1971, several well-known professionals – professors, doctors, writers, and so on – were picked up from their homes in Dhaka by bands of Bengali youth identified by eyewitnesses as members of the "Al Badr", a group of Bengali loyalists organised by the Pakistan army.³⁵ Some of those picked up were never seen again. The bodies of many were found at a brick kiln at Rayerbazar in Dhaka. All had their eyes blindfolded and hands tied behind their backs.

One such case was Aleem Chowdhury, an eye specialist, who used to help the rebels by raising funds, and providing medical supplies and professional care. By a bizarre coincidence, he had given refuge in the clinic downstairs in his house to Moulana Abdul Mannan, who turned out to be a member of the "Al Badr". Chowdhury was picked up on December 15. The Moulana declined to intervene despite the pleadings of his wife. The war in East Pakistan ended on December 16 and Bangladesh came into being. Chowdhury's body was found on December 18. He had been shot, and had multiple injuries thought to be inflicted by a bayonet. He is believed to have been killed during the night of December 15-16.

Many Bangladeshis hold Major General Rao Farman Ali of the Pakistan army responsible for this hit-squad style execution of Bengali professionals, at least in part because a list of intellectuals in his handwriting was found after the war. A direct link to the army is hard to establish, however, as all the eyewitness accounts by relatives describe the victims as being picked up by Bengali members of "Al Badr". Aleem Chowdhury's family holds Moulana Mannan responsible for his killing.³⁶ The account of the only known survivor of the Rayerbazar killings also speaks of only Bengalis as the captors and killers of fellow Bengali professionals on the eve of the creation of Bangladesh.³⁷

Attacks on Non-Bengalis and "Loyalist" Bengalis

"We did 'revenge killings'" said a former "muktijoddha" in Mymensingh, with a sense of exacting justice, about the immediate aftermath following the end of the war in East Pakistan on December 16, 1971.³⁸ Attacks on non-Bengalis and loyalist

Bengalis by pro-liberation Bengalis occurred in many areas in the new country, including public lynching in some cases even in front of the camera. In the capital, Dhaka, a crowd of thousands watched, and foreign journalists photographed, "Muktibahini" commander Kader Siddiqui and his men bayoneted bound prisoners to death. In a chilling mirror-image of the killing of pro-liberation intellectuals earlier, the "loyalist" vice-chancellor of Dhaka University was picked up on December 19, beaten, stabbed repeatedly and left for dead in a paralytic state on a street the next morning.³⁹ As late as March 1972, with Sheikh Mujib back and at the helm of government in Bangladesh, another mass killing of "Biharis" by Bengalis occurred in Khulna.⁴⁰

IV Patterns of Violence: Some Preliminary Indicators

(i) Multiple parties in the conflict, each both perpetrator and victim of violence: Popular perceptions as well as "victor's history" following India's political, military and diplomatic triumph over Pakistan in 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh have tended to portray the civil war in East Pakistan simply as the West Pakistani military regime suppressing the rebel Bengali province. Certainly the military regime of the time attempted to impose a military solution on a seemingly intractable political problem, with disastrous consequences. However, a closer look at the conflicts on the ground reveals a more complex reality, in which there were multiple parties in the conflict and each were both perpetrators and victims of violence in 1971.

To begin with, this was not a simple "west versus east" contest. With the notable exception of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, most political players in West Pakistan were amenable to transferring power to the Bengali nationalist party which had won the elections. On the other hand, Biharis as well as many Bengalis in East Pakistan were opposed to the break-up of the country. Bengali nationalist memoirs show a loyalist presence in practically every neighbourhood.

Some pro-liberation civilians also accuse Bengali military officers of being opportunists, who joined the independence struggle only after the military action endangered their own lives. They have little empathy with the difficult position Bengali members of the armed forces found themselves in, or that it was quite reasonable for many of them to have remained cautious as professionals until events overtook their oath of loyalty. Some among the Bengali military argue in return that it was they, not the politicians, who did the actual fighting.

Nor was violence the means adopted by only one side. Once the political contest polarised into support for a united Pakistan versus secession of Bangladesh, West Pakistanis, non-Bengali East Pakistanis (Biharis) and loyalist Bengalis were broadly ranged on the side of a united Pakistan, against pro-liberation Bengalis and their Indian allies. In the course of the war, members of each group used violence as the means to their ends and were also victims of violence.

(ii) Hatred fanned by attribution of "treason" to the "other" by both sides: Due to the successful emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country, it is sometimes overlooked that in 1971, the defence of the unity and integrity of Pakistan – espoused by Biharis and "loyalist" Bengalis including members of Islamic parties – was a legitimate political position, indeed the "patriotic"

political position, as opposed to the secession proposed by pro-liberation Bengalis. The alliance of the latter with arch-enemy India was particularly "traitorous".

To pro-liberation Bengalis, however, West Pakistan came to be seen as a "foreign occupier", and Biharis and loyalist Bengalis who cooperated with the government were considered "traitors" to the Bengali cause. Both political positions were legitimate, but each side was entirely intolerant of the other's perspective. The intolerance was particularly bitter between loyalist and secessionist Bengalis. The hatred fanned by the civil war was considerably heightened by the attribution of "treason" by each side upon the other, and contributed to the brutality with which the war was fought.

(iii) Brutality and humanity found in all warring parties: While the excessive force used by the Pakistan army in the course of putting down the rebellion in East Pakistan, along with allegations of atrocities, has received greater public attention, the examination of incidents of violence at the ground level bear out Sisson and Rose's conclusion that "One thing is clear – the atrocities did not just go one way, though Bengali Muslims and Hindus were certainly the main victims."⁴¹ Many Bengali victims, Muslim or Hindu, are also found to have suffered at the hands of other Bengalis.

It is likely that, even after discounting exaggerations, the armed forces and loyalist Bengalis may be responsible for a greater proportion of casualties, due to greater fire power and a longer period of holding the "upper hand", following military action on March 25. However, pro-liberation Bengalis also adopted violence as the means to their end and their leadership did not uphold or enforce a principled stand against violence towards unarmed people and political opponents, presumed or real. In many areas, pro-liberation Bengalis' violence towards perceived opponents abated only upon the arrival of the army and resurfaced as soon as the war ended. The culture of violence fomented by the conflict of 1971 forms the context of subsequent events in Bangladesh.

The case studies show that brutalities were committed by all parties in the conflict and no party is in a position to occupy the moral high ground on this question without first acknowledging and expressing remorse for the inhumanities committed by its own side. Both sides must be held equally accountable in terms of the nature of the crime. Equally, acts of humanity in the midst of a bitter conflict are found on all sides, with Bengalis, Biharis and West Pakistanis helping one another in the midst of mayhem. Indeed, it is this reality that makes the conflict in East Pakistan in 1971 suitable to a "reconciliatory" approach, rather than a recriminatory one.

(iv) Inconsistent evidence on targeting of Hindus: To the West Pakistani authorities as well as many Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus were a suspect population on the basis of their religious affinity to India. In a civil war in which the secessionists were allied with India, the Hindus of East Pakistan were in a very vulnerable position.

However, the case studies reveal contradictory evidence on the targeting of Hindus. The attack on Shankharipara in old Dhaka during "Operation Searchlight" appears to have been on the basis of religion. Of professors targeted at Dhaka University, Guhathakurta (a Hindu) was asked his religion before being shot, but the other faculty member killed with him was Maniruzzaman (a Muslim). In fact, as three relatives were killed with Maniruzzaman, four Muslims and one Hindu were killed at that

particular building that night. Clearly, factors other than religion were also at play.

The Hindu villagers of Khulna who were fleeing to India via Chuknagar in May say they were doing so due to harassment – by local Bengali Muslims, not the West Pakistani military. Local Bengali Muslims also appear to have gained the most materially by the distress sales of the Hindu refugees, as also from the loot from the dead at Chuknagar. However, the killing of Hindu males was done by the armed forces.

One male Hindu refugee, Nitai Gayen, who survived the shooting at Chuknagar, offered this as explanation of why he was targeted: “I don’t think they targeted us (male refugees) because we were Hindus. I think they targeted us because they considered us the “enemy”. We were going to India. Some of us would return, and we would not return empty-handed.”⁴² In the end, in spite of the vulnerability of the Hindu population, the internal conflict remained predominantly a war of Muslims against other Muslims.

(v) Ethnicisation of “enemy” and “ally”: The case studies show a striking tendency to “ethnicise” the “enemy” or the “ally” in terms of regional ethnic identity. Pro-liberation Bengalis defined their identity in terms of language, hence the non-Bengali people of East Pakistan, collectively referred to as Biharis, became marked as the “enemy” along with West Pakistanis, who were often collectively referred to as “Punjabis” regardless of whether they were from Punjab or not.

However, in the case studies, when Bengalis did make a distinction among West Pakistanis, a noticeable number identified “better” or “more humane” members of the West Pakistani armed forces as “Beluchi” – ethnic Baloch people. People in towns and villages, men and women, with different experiences of violent conflict, mentioned “Beluchis” as a better sort among West Pakistanis. Small kindnesses, such as someone slipping food to prisoners under interrogation, or an officer rescuing a boy from forced labour – were attributed to the person being a “Beluchi”.

This is intriguing, as the proportion of ethnic Balochis is low in the Pakistan army, “Baloch” regiments are not exclusively comprised of ethnic Balochis, and most Bengalis were not in a position to distinguish among West Pakistanis on the basis of appearance. The characterisation may be due to a feeling of solidarity towards Balochi people as another oppressed group. General Tikka Khan, who was sent as governor to East Pakistan in 1971 and launched the military action, was also known as the “butcher of Balochistan”. Some of the feeling may be retrospective, given the Baloch uprising of 1973 which was crushed with great force by the regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

The second group identified as “better” by Bengalis was “Pathans”. While recounting the two cases in Rajshahi where one village had suffered a mass killing of men, while the other had not, the villagers stated – as if by explanation – that the officer who did the killing was a “Punjabi”, while the one who did not was “Pathan”. As an ethnic group, “Punjabis” come in for an almost complete demonisation, with only the rare acknowledgement of the possibility that there might be some “good” Punjabis as well.⁴³

(vi) Pakistan army’s actions marked by a pattern of targeting of adult males while sparing women and children: The case studies show a clear pattern by the Pakistan army of targeting adult males and sparing women and children as they recaptured control of the territory after March 25. The officer at the faculty quarters in Dhaka University during “Operation Searchlight” assured Guhathakurta’s wife that there was no danger to her and her

daughter, but all the young men at Maniruzzaman’s apartment were killed with him. In the village in Rajshahi, women and children were separated and sent away before the men were interrogated and killed. At Chuknagar, even amidst the melee of refugees, adult men were shot while women and children all around them remained unhurt. Only men were assembled and killed at Boroitola in Mymensingh.

(vii) Mob violence involved indiscriminate killing of men, women and children: Mob violence, such as the massacre of Biharis by Bengalis at Crescent Jute Mills in Khulna referred to earlier, involved indiscriminate killing of men, women and children. Large-scale incidents of “Bihari”-Bengali ethnic violence appear to have involved indiscriminate killing.

(viii) No rape of women by Pakistan army found in the specific case studies: In all of the incidents involving the Pakistan army in the case studies, the armed forces were found not to have raped women. While this cannot be extrapolated beyond the few specific incidents in this study, it is significant, as in the popular narrative the allegation of rape is often clubbed together with allegation of killing. Rape allegations were made in prior verbal discussions in some cases and in a published work on one of the incidents. However, Bengali eyewitnesses, participants and survivors of the incidents testified to the violence and killings, but also testified that no rape had taken place in these cases. While rape is known to occur in all situations of war, charges and counter-charges on rape form a particularly contentious issue in this conflict. The absence of this particular form of violence in these instances underlines the care that needs to be taken to distinguish between circumstances in which rape may have taken place from those in which it did not.

Conclusion

The analysis of the conflict of 1971 through in-depth study of ground-level incidents and cross-checking of primary material underlines the importance of a careful, evidence-based approach to this subject. As the biggest losers of 1971, West Pakistan and the Pakistan army in particular have remained defensive, in a state of denial, or silent about the events of that year. Bangladeshis are understandably more voluble about the birth of their country, but have done less well at systematic historical record-keeping, and a vast proportion of literature put out on 1971 is marred by unsubstantiated sensationalism.

There is also the cultivation of an unhealthy “victim culture” by some of the pro-liberationists – hence the people of Chuknagar complain about being left out of the official history books and vie to establish their village as the site of the “biggest mass killing” in the country, and people are instigated at the national level to engage in a ghoulish competition with six million Jews in order to gain international attention. These tendencies hamper the systematic study of the conflict of 1971 and hinder a true understanding of a cataclysmic restructuring in modern south Asian history.

The civil war of 1971 was fought between those who believed they were fighting for a united Pakistan and those who believed their chance for justice and progress lay in an independent Bangladesh. Both were legitimate political positions. All parties in this conflict embraced violence as a means to the end, all committed acts of brutality outside accepted norms of warfare, and all had their share of humanity. These attributes make the 1971 conflict particularly suitable for efforts

towards reconciliation, rather than the recrimination that has so far been its hallmark. **EPW**

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Notes

[An earlier version of this paper served as the basis for the author's presentation at the conference 'South Asia in Crisis: United States Policy 1961-72', US State Department, Washington, DC, June 28-29, 2005.]

- 1 This was the first "free and fair" election on universal suffrage held in Pakistan, as promised by the new military ruler General Yahya Khan when he took over in 1969 from General Ayub Khan who had ruled since 1958. The Bengali nationalist party Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with a manifesto that stood for autonomy or secession, depending on one's perspective, won an overwhelming victory in East Pakistan, but not a single seat in West Pakistan. Yet, due to the Bengali population being greater, this gave them majority in the national assembly. The People's Party led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto won a majority of seats in the West, but not a single one in the East. Negotiations among the political parties, brokered by the military regime, to chart a way through this polarised result, dragged on till their collapse on March 25, 1971, when the regime launched military action to crush the rebellion in East Pakistan.
- 2 Bengalis referred to Ismailis as "Agakhans" or "from Bombay", and usually lumped all West Pakistanis together as "Punjabis".
- 3 The only comprehensive scholarly study of the 1971 conflict remains Richard Sisson and Leo Rose's impressive work, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India and the Creation of Bangladesh* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990). Some military officers of all three countries have written memoirs. In Bangladesh there is a virtual cottage industry of literature on 1971 in the Bengali language, mostly of a very poor quality, both due to a lack of a systematic approach and the use of dubious and unreliable information. The best primary material is the series of short accounts by participants or eyewitnesses edited by Rashid Haider, published by the Bangla Academy, and a few personal memoirs.
- 4 Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976 (FRUS), Vol XI, 'South Asia Crisis, 1971', 2005, pp 36-37. In another phone conversation with Kissinger the next day, President Nixon says, "The main thing to do is to keep cool and not do anything. There is nothing in it for us either way."
- 5 Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol XI, 'South Asia Crisis, 1971', 2005, pp 17-20.
- 6 For example, Jahanara Imam, *Ekattorer Dinguli* (Sandhani Prakashani, Dhaka, 1986), who also found bomb-making material in her own son's room; Archer Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (The University Press, Dhaka, 2002). Anthony Mascarenhas mentions "shot guns, swords, home-made spears, bamboo poles and iron rods" as some of the weapons people brought as they gathered to hear Mujib (Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangladesh* (Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1971), p 99).
- 7 Kaliranjan Shil, 'Jagannath Hall-ei chhilam' in Rashid Haider (ed), *1971: Bhayabaha Abhignata* (Sahitya Prakash, Dhaka, 1996).
- 8 Mascarenhas (1971), '25 Days to Remember'. Some Bengalis privately acknowledged to this author that there were attacks upon non-Bengalis during this period.
- 9 Major General H A Qureshi, *The 1971 Indo-Pak War*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2003, pp 16-17.
- 10 Mascarenhas (1971), p 105. Mascarenhas was among a group of Pakistani journalists taken on a tour of East Pakistan by the military authorities in April 1971. He fled to Britain and his report on the brutal suppression of the rebellion was published in the *Sunday Times*.
- 11 Shil in Haider (ed) (1996).
- 12 Tape recording of communications among Pakistan army units on the night of March 25-26, 1971, made by M M Hussain, Atomic Energy Centre, Dhaka, recorded at Khilgaon Chowdhury Para, Dhaka. Archives of the Liberation War Museum, Dhaka.
- 13 Author's interview, Rabintra Mohan Das, Dhaka University, 2005. Lieutenant General Kamal Matinuddin, *Tragedy of Errors: East Pakistan Crisis 1968-1971* (Services Book Club, Lahore, 1993), p 250. Film footage of apparent executions in the games field outside the student halls, taken by Nurul Ula, appears not to have been preserved in any relevant museum in Bangladesh. Ula's account, 'Gonohatyar chhobi', is in Haider (ed) (1996).

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- 14 Author's interview with Lieutenant General A A K Niazi, Lahore, 2003. See also his book, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan* (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2002).
- 15 Nazrul Islam, 'Shorir-bhedi Bullet' in Haider (ed) (1996).
- 16 In a meeting held at San Clemente, California, on March 31, Kissinger enquires, "Did they kill Professor Razak? He was one of my students." David Blee of the CIA replies, "I think so. They killed a lot of people at the university" (FRUS, Vol XI, p 42). Actually, Razak lived in the same building as Guhathakurta, but was not killed. Dhaka University sources opine that he was likely a "fellow student", not a student, of Kissinger.
- 17 Author's interview with Major General Ghulam Umar, Karachi, 2005.
- 18 Basanti Guhathakurta, *Ekattorer Smriti* (University Press, Dhaka, 2000); author's interview with Meghna Guhathakurta, daughter of Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Dhaka University, 2005. Another faculty member's experience is in Md Anisur Rahman, *My Story of 1971* (Liberation War Museum, Dhaka, 2001).
- 19 Blood (2002), p 198; Mascarenhas (1971), p 114.
- 20 Author's interviews of survivors at Shankharipara, Dhaka, 2004-05. The difficulty of documenting events of 1971 and the need for meticulous verification is highlighted by the fact that even in a publication of the Liberation War Museum, Dhaka, a photo of Chandhan Sur's body, dressed in the traditional "lungi", is mislabelled as a woman allegedly raped and killed with her child.
- 21 Government of Pakistan's official position is that plans for the mutiny were already in place and that theirs was a pre-emptive action.
- 22 Author's interviews, Mymensingh. The mutiny in Mymensingh is cited also in the Government of Pakistan's White Paper of August 1971.
- 23 Major General K M Safiullah, 'Aloukik jibanlabh' in Haider (ed) (1996). Author's translation from Bengali. Similar realism is expressed by Shamsheer M Chowdhury, then adjutant to Major Zia, recounting his capture by former colleagues of the Pakistani forces, in 'Chhoybar mriyudanda', Haider (ed) (1996). Decorated by Bangladesh for his role in the liberation war, Chowdhury is currently Bangladesh's ambassador to Washington.
- 24 Anthony Mascarenhas' report in the *Sunday Times* on the suppression of the rebellion in East Pakistan was a searing indictment of the military action. However, in that report he also wrote, "First it was the massacre of non-Bengalis in a savage outburst of Bengali hatred. Now it was massacre deliberately carried out by the West Pakistan army." His account contains grisly allegations of butchery and rape by Bengalis against "Bihari" men, women and children, with an estimated death toll in the same range as alleged Bengali victims later. (Mascarenhas, *Sunday Times*, June 13, 1971).
- 25 Author's interviews with Bengali mill workers and "Bihari" settlers, Khulna, 2004. Both groups confirm large-scale killing of "Biharis", but differ on estimate of casualties. Bengalis also recounted death-squad type killings of Bengalis by 'Biharis' in the following months, when "Biharis", as supporters of the government, had the upper hand, and again revenge killings by Bengalis of "Biharis" following Bangladesh's independence.
- 26 Many incidents of Bengalis killing "Biharis" are listed in the government White Paper of August, 1971. Some are recounted in memoirs of army officers. Inexplicably, the Pakistan government did not publicise the alleged killings at the time, reducing the credibility of the White Paper later in the year. Bengali accounts typically only recount "Bihari" violence against Bengalis.
- 27 Author's interviews, Satiarchora 2004. Later in the year, the rebels were better organised in the Tangail area under Kader Siddiqi, whom General Niazi mentions as well as the one well-organised rebel force [Niazi 2002:216].
- 28 Major General A O Mitha's autobiography, *Unlikely Beginnings: A Soldier's Life* (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2003) is one of the best of its kind (pp 343-44).
- 29 Author's interviews with villagers who were eyewitnesses and survivors, including the only man whose life was spared by the officer in charge and another who survived multiple bullet injuries and crawled out of the stack of burning dead bodies, Rajshahi, 2004. Both are remarkable in the way they have coped with their trauma and the thoughtful and level-headed way they recount their experience.
- 30 Author's interviews at Chuknagar and surrounding villages of widows and mothers of victims, male survivors, eyewitnesses and those who disposed of the bodies, 2004-05. The trigger for the army action on that particular day is unclear, but is believed to be based on information provided by local Bengali loyalists.
- 31 Blood (2002), pp 216-17.
- 32 In a curious twist, there is suspicion of the Naxalites having formed a tactical alliance with the Pakistanis [Niazi 1998], p 66; also accounts of some individual "Muktijoddhas".
- 33 Author's interviews, including with Abul Barak Alvi, a member of the underground group, who managed to talk his way out of custody. Many individual memoirs are published in Bengali, e.g., Haider (ed) (1996). One moving human account is *Ekattorer Dinguli* by Jahanara Imam, whose son Rumi was one of these young men, presumed executed after his capture on August 29.
- 34 Author's interviews with a survivor of the shooting and local rebel fighters, 2004.
- 35 The "Al-Badr" and "Al-Shams" were "Razakar" or loyalist forces raised locally. General Niazi writes that due to lack of adequate training and poor availability of weapons for them, some West Pakistani police and non-Bengali elements were mixed with them [Niazi 1998:79]. However, eyewitness accounts of the December pick-ups describe the men involved as Bengalis.
- 36 Interview with Shyamoli Nasreen Chowdhury, Chowdhury's widow, his daughter and brother. Shyamoli Chowdhury's account of what happened and those of the relatives or friends of many of the other victims, are published in the series *Smriti 1971* (Bangla Academy) and also Haider (ed) (1996). I requested a meeting with Moulana Mannan, to be told that a stroke had left him bed-ridden and without the power of speech. Mannan had later become a minister in the Bangladeshi government and is the proprietor of a major newspaper there.
- 37 Dilawar Hossain, account reproduced in 'Ekattorer Ghatok-dalalera ke Kothay' (Muktijuddha Chetona Bikash Kendro, Dhaka, 1989).
- 38 Author's discussions with former "muktijoddhas" in Mymensingh 2004.
- 39 The public bayoneting was reported at the time in the media. The vice-chancellor Syed Sajjad Husain's ordeal is recounted in his book, *The Wastes of Time: Reflections on the Decline and Fall of East Pakistan*, (Notun Safar Prokashani, Dhaka, 1995).
- 40 Author's discussions with Bengalis and "Biharis" in Khulna, 2004.
- 41 Sisson and Rose (1990), p 306.
- 42 Interview with author, Khulna, 2004.
- 43 Not all Bengalis seem aware of the irony that General Yahya Khan was a (Persian-origin) Pathan, as was General Niazi, the Eastern commander (though from Punjab), while many of the Indian "liberators" warmly embraced by Bangladeshis were Punjabis!

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