

# The 1971 East Pakistan Genocide - A Realist Perspective

Nitin Pai

The genocide in East Pakistan was perhaps among the few that did not come as a surprise, not least to the victims. It accompanied the birth of a new nation leaving horrible birthmarks that disfigure Bangladeshi society to this day. Bangladesh in 1971 was the site of multiple conflicts: a civil war between the two wings of Pakistan, communal violence between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, a genocide, an guerilla war, a conventional war and a counter-genocide. In each of these conflicts perpetrators, victims and onlookers often exchanged roles. A total study of the conflict is beyond the scope of this essay. This essay examines the causes, course and results of one sub-conflict—the genocide against Bengalis by the West Pakistani army—and attempts to explain it through a Realist perspective.

*Kill three million of them and the rest will eat out of our hands - General Yahya Khan<sup>1</sup>*

*"We have to sort them out to restore the land to the people and the people to their Faith" - Colonel Naim, 9th Division HQ, Pakistan Army<sup>2</sup>*

*...the jawan (snatched) away his lungi. The skinny body that was bared revealed the distinctive traces of circumcision, which was obligatory for Muslims. At least it could be seen that Bari was not a Hindu.<sup>3</sup>*

## Pakistan 1971: Sturm und Drang

Tropical Cyclone *Bhola*, a category 3 storm, made landfall on the East Pakistan coastline on November 12, 1970. It claimed between 250,000 to 500,000 lives<sup>4</sup>. It also set off a chain of events that would result in a genocide, another war between India and Pakistan, the birth of a new state and the death of an old theory.

*Unequal halves*. By 1970, the uneasy relationship between Pakistan's two geographically-separated wings was under severe strain. The poorer, more populous, Bengali-speaking East Pakistan came to realise that it was effectively a colony of the richer, Punjabi-dominated West Pakistan. The ruling civilian and military elite belonged to the West, as did the top business families<sup>5</sup>. While the bulk of the country's foreign exchange earnings came from the export of jute from the East Pakistan, it received only a third of the money spent on development projects<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, more than two decades of co-habitation had not diminished the condescending attitudes that the West Pakistanis had for their Bengali compatriots—the latter were seen as "low lying people of a low lying land"<sup>7</sup> whose commitment to Pakistan was polluted by Hindu culture and a large Hindu minority<sup>8</sup>.

Some scholars have argued that by 1970, Pakistan's ruling elite had come to realise that the east wing was about to become a drain on the economy: jute export revenues were declining and the economy hadn't diversified beyond agriculture. Also while the doctrine "the

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Payne, *Massacre*, (New York: Macmillan 1973)

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, 'Genocide'

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Beachler, 'The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 41, No. 5, December 2007, 467-492

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publications 1971) quoted in Beachler, 'The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh'

<sup>7</sup> This remark is attributed to Lt-Gen AAK Niazi, in Gendercide Watch, 'Case Study: Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971', [http://www.gendercide.org/case\\_bangladesh.html](http://www.gendercide.org/case_bangladesh.html), accessed on April 9th, 2008

<sup>8</sup> Philip Oldenburg, "'A Place Insufficiently Imagined': Language, Belief and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4, August 1985, 711-730

defence of the East lies in the West" allowed Pakistan to devote a relatively small proportion of its military resources directly defending the east wing from an Indian invasion, the military government was aware that stationing and supplying forces there was likely to pose a heavy financial burden in the long term<sup>9</sup>.

*An elusive transition.* It was in the context of these deepening rifts that General Yahya Khan, the president of Pakistan's military government, announced elections to the national assembly that would herald the country's transition to democracy. In mid-1970, it was expected that a government dominated by political parties from the west wing would be in place, in all likelihood with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leader of the left-leaning Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as prime minister. Mujibur Rahman's Awami League was expected to do well in East Pakistan.

*Bhola* struck after elections had been announced but before the scheduled elections on December 7th, 1970. The government's slow and lacklustre relief efforts to one of the country's worst calamities in decades further alienated the Bengalis<sup>10</sup>. The result was a overwhelming wave of support for Mujib's Awami League which had made the battle for provincial autonomy the central plank of its political agenda. In the event, the elections resulted in a overall majority for the Awami League in the national assembly<sup>11</sup>, giving it the power to execute its promise of securing autonomy for East Pakistan. Seeing his political ambitions at the risk of being washed away, Bhutto precipitated a political crisis by refusing to attend the national assembly session. General Yahya postponed the session that had been set for March 3rd, 1971, setting off protests and riots

in East Pakistan<sup>12</sup>. On March 7th, Mujib spoke at a public meeting called for substantive autonomy but stopped short of advocating secession. He also called for civil disobedience and non co-operation to protest against the postponement (and feared cancellation) of the national assembly session.

While *hartals* were widely observed, disrupting normal life, the protests were not peaceful. There were cases of security forces firing on protesters and also violent riots between Bengalis and 'Biharis' (non-Bengalis)<sup>13</sup>. West Pakistani soldiers from the Pakistan army were subjected to insult, economic boycotts and in some cases fatal attacks<sup>14</sup>.

*Military moves.* While the army did not respond to these attacks on its personnel, it is likely that the military leadership had already decided on a brutal military course to suppress Bengali moves towards secession. Lieutenant-General Tikka Khan replaced Admiral Syed Mohammed Ahsan as the military governor of East Pakistan. Lieutenant General A A K Niazi took over as military commander from the conscientious Lieutenant-General Sahibzada Yaqub Khan. While General Yahya and Bhutto flew to Dhaka to negotiate with Mujib, the army sent reinforcements to its eastern wing. India had cut off overflight rights, as a result of which troops were moved by air and sea (via Sri Lanka). At least 10,000 additional West Pakistani troops were moved to Dhaka between February and March bringing (non-Bengali) troop strength to around 30,000<sup>15</sup>. A number of tanks were moved from Rangpur on the Indian border, to Dhaka. This led Sydney Schanberg, an American journalist, to conclude that "the negotiations were merely a smokescreen to buy time until enough troops had been brought in to

<sup>9</sup> Field Marshall Ayub Khan, quoted in Oldenburg, "A Place Insufficiently Imagined": Language, Belief and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971'

<sup>10</sup> Sydney H. Schanberg, 'Pakistan Divided', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 1, October 1971

<sup>11</sup> It won 167 of the 313 seats

<sup>12</sup> Beachler, 'The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh'

<sup>13</sup> Oldenburg, "A Place Insufficiently Imagined": Language, Belief and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971'

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, 'Genocide', *The Sunday Times*, June 13th 1971

<sup>15</sup> Estimated from the troop numbers cited by US officials between the beginning and the end of March 1971. See Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976, *South Asia Crisis, 1971*, Volume XI, (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 2005

launch the attack.” The army attacked on March 25th<sup>16</sup> and Mujib declared independence for Bangla Desh soon after. The genocide had started.

### Terror as an instrument of policy

*A whiff of gunpowder would overawe the meek Bengalis*<sup>17</sup>. Why did the military government decide to use firepower against its Bengali citizens? Firstly, it was faced with a scenario where, at best, the government would fall into Bengali hands, and at worst, would lead to a break-up of the country. General Yahya and the more hardline members of the army’s top leadership decided to terrorise the east wing into submission. Even if they had wanted to, it would have been almost impossible for the army to control a hostile population of 75 million Bengalis using gentler tactics. Instead, they calculated that the Bengalis, who they saw as weak, non-martial and cowardly would give up their rebellion out of fear.

*Hinduphobia*. Secondly, the military leadership saw a need to destroy what it saw as the pernicious Hindu influence over Bengali society that had both corrupted Bengali Muslims and fuelled secessionist impulses (and also acted as a fifth column for India). They calculated that purifying East Pakistan, by cleansing the population of the Hindus, by killing them or forcing them to neighbouring India, would supplant its Bengali national identity with an Islamic one<sup>18</sup>.

*Perpetrators*. The West Pakistani army was the principal perpetrator of the Bengali genocide. In addition to regular soldiers and paramilitary troops, the military government also constituted *razakars*, or armed militias from among the Bihari and Bengali citizens. The two

main groups—Al Badr and Al Shams—would later gain considerable notoriety, not least for the killing of around a 1000 intellectuals towards the end of the war in early-December 1971. In addition, a large number of people acted as informers and collaborators—either voluntarily or out of coercion.

*Who were the victims?* The army set out to exterminate not only those Bengalis who, in its view, had the intention to move the east wing towards secession, but also those who had the capacity. In other words, both existing and potential votaries of Bangla Desh were targets for killing<sup>19</sup>. The first category included Awami League members and supporters, including Bengali intellectuals, university students, the urban poor. Also in this category was the Hindu minority<sup>20</sup> (around 10 million in number). Among those in the second category were Bengali members of the armed forces and police who were automatically marked out as targets despite having loyally served Pakistan. This category came to include young men who were seen as potential recruits for the insurgent groups fighting Pakistani rule.

While all Hindus were killed, lives of Muslim women and children were generally spared. But rape was commonplace, and both Hindu and Muslim women were subjected to sexual violence by soldiers and *razakars*<sup>21</sup>.

### The course of genocide

Three phases are discernible in the pattern of genocide between March 25th and December 16th, with an additional “counter-genocide” after the Pakistani military surrender<sup>22</sup>.

*Searchlight*. The first phase, started with Operation Searchlight on March 25th and

<sup>16</sup> It has been argued that the military operations started on March 23rd, two days before the Yahya-Mujib talks ended in failure. See Sujjan Singh Uban, *Phantoms of Chittagong: The “Fifth Army” in Bangladesh* (New Delhi: Allied Publications 1985)

<sup>17</sup> Stephen P Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, (Washington, DC: Brookings 2004)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, 116-117

<sup>20</sup> Beachler, ‘The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh’

<sup>21</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1975)

<sup>22</sup> Beachler, ‘The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh’

extended into the middle of May. It involved a massive operation by the Pakistan army against its targets, with little organised Bengali armed resistance. For instance, tanks and heavy artillery were used against population centres of Dhaka. Entire neighbourhoods were set on fire, and those seeking to escape were gunned down. Dhaka university was the site of a large number of killings. While many of the operations were focused around Hindus, the pattern of killings was indiscriminate. There were pre-emptive killings of Bengali police and paramilitary personnel who were massacred in their thousands. The death toll in Dhaka in the week alone was 30,000<sup>23</sup>. The pattern was repeated in urban areas across Bangladesh, causing people to flee to the countryside and to India. By mid-May, the Pakistan army controlled the towns and cities. Villages remained as “liberated areas”<sup>24</sup>.

“*Search and destroy*”. The second phase, from mid-May to early October, the Bengali resistance under the banner of *Mukti Bahini* was better organised and received training, equipment and shelter in neighbouring India. In a guerilla campaign, it targeted the army’s supply routes and carried out raids on targets of opportunity. It enjoyed popular support among the local population and used its superior knowledge of the local terrain to deny the army a chance to dominate the countryside. Consequently, the army carried its genocidal tactics to its counter-insurgency campaign.

The army carried out “search and destroy” operations in the countryside—essentially burning down entire villages on the hint of a suspicion of their aiding rebel fighters, or as a deterrent. Women were special targets during this phase. A large number were the

victims of “hit-and-run” rape, often carried out in view of their male family members (who were subsequently killed). A relatively smaller number were taken away and kept in captivity as sex-slaves. Most estimates put the number of rape victims as being around 200,000 to 400,000<sup>25</sup>. The refugee crisis worsened and around 30,000 to 50,000 refugees were crossing the border into India each day.

“*Scorched Earth*”. The final phase, from October to December 16th, saw the outbreak of war between India and Pakistan and ended with the surrender of the Pakistan army’s eastern command, under Gen Niazi, to a joint India-Bangla Desh forces under Lieutenant-General Jagjit Singh Aurora. It also saw a final bout of targeted killings of intellectuals: university professors, doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professionals, at the hands of the Pakistan army and the *razakars*. Around 1000 intellectuals were killed in Dhaka, two days before the Pakistani surrender, in what might have been a kind of “scorched earth policy”, the objective of which is hard to discern.

It is generally believed that these killings were carried out to destroy the most valuable human capital that the new nation needed. But it was a lightning war, and while Gen Niazi and his troops in the eastern command were aware that their own position was increasingly hopeless, it is possible that they continued to believe that Pakistan would get an upper hand on the western front, and force an overall stalemate.

In the event, Pakistan did not launch an all-out war against India, preferring to end the war with the fall of Dhaka<sup>26</sup>, and electing to not further risk West Pakistan from being overrun by the Indian army<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Gendercide Watch, ‘Case Study: Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971’

<sup>24</sup> Rounaq Jahan, ‘The Bangladesh Genocide’, in Samuel Totten (ed), *Teaching about Genocide: Issues Approaches and Resources*, (Information Age Publishing 2004), 143-153

<sup>25</sup> Sarmila Bose argues that figures of raped women have been grossly exaggerated. See Sarmila Bose, ‘Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 22, 2007. However, the case-study based extrapolation method she uses is questionable in the particular socio-economic context, where there is likely to be a reluctance by victims to admit being raped, more than 35 years after the event. Bose’s reliance on Pakistani military sources diminishes the credibility of her conclusions.

<sup>26</sup> Owen Bennett Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 2003) 146-186

<sup>27</sup> AAK Niazi, in an interview with Hamid Mir, *Rediff.com*, February 2nd 2004, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2004/feb/02inter1.htm> accessed on March 6th 2008

*Vengeance.* The Pakistani surrender was followed by widespread reprisals against Biharis and those that the Bengalis saw as collaborators. The Indian Army's attempt to protect the Bihari population from the wrath of the Bangladeshis could not prevent the killing of around 150,000 people<sup>28</sup>. Many thousands were interned in camps ahead of their expulsion to (West) Pakistan. On the one hand *Mukti Bahini* forces exacted vengeance against *razakars* and collaborators, including Bengali men in the rural areas. On the other the popular resentment over the role of pro-Pakistan elements took the shape of inter-ethnic communal riots of which Biharis bore the brunt.

### **It was genocide**

*Was it genocide?* In sharp contrast to other conflicts of the late-20th century, the mass killings in East Pakistan were labelled as "genocide" fairly early and received considerable coverage in the international media.

*Bad portents.* In fact, perhaps because the intentions of the military leadership was not entirely a secret in February 1971, *Forum*, a Dhaka-based weekly magazine had called attention to the threat of genocide as early as March 6th and also on March 20th, *before* the army began Operation Searchlight<sup>29</sup>. On March 11th, Mujib himself publicly warned U Thant<sup>30</sup>, the United Nations secretary-general, that "threat that is now held out is that of genocide and the denial of the fundamental human rights".

*Well covered.* Despite the media censorship and expulsion of foreign journalists, the story of mass-murders in East Pakistan was extensively

covered in the international media<sup>31</sup>. On June 13th, the UK's *Sunday Times* published a front-page story on the killings in Bangladesh under a one-word headline, "Genocide". It provided a graphic account of the mass killings of Bengalis by the army<sup>32</sup>.

*Diplomatic dissent.* As early as April 6th, two weeks after *Operation Searchlight* started, US foreign service officers covering South Asia, in a dissenting note (which has come to be called the "Blood telegram" after Archer Blood, the US consul-general in Dhaka) argued that "the overworked term genocide is applicable" in the East Pakistan<sup>33</sup>. This was repeated by Kenneth Keating, US ambassador to India, in his meeting with President Nixon on June 15th<sup>34</sup>. As diplomats they were undoubtedly familiar with the definition of genocide under the 1948 UN Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention). Despite the United States not having ratified the Genocide Convention at that time, they would have been aware that the term genocide would place specific obligations on the international community to take action to prevent and suppress the genocide. It is unlikely that they would have used the term lightly. Their view was corroborated by eyewitness accounts of American evacuees that appeared in the Western media.

*Indian voices.* The Indian government too described the events in East Pakistan as genocide. In late-July, Foreign Minister Sardar Swaran Singh<sup>35</sup> accused the US of condoning genocide by continuing military shipments to Pakistan. Finally, in her letter to President Nixon on December 5th, following India's declaration of war against Pakistan, Prime Minister Indira

<sup>28</sup> Gendercide Watch, 'Case Study: Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971'

<sup>29</sup> Rehman Sobhan's essays reprinted in 'Countdown to Freedom', *Forum*, Vol. 3, No.3, March 2008

<sup>30</sup> 'Threat of denial of human rights to Bengalees, Mujib tells Thant', *Daily Morning News*, March 11th 1971

<sup>31</sup> Michael Stohl, 'Outside of a Small Circle of Friends: States, Genocide, Mass Killing and The Role of Bystanders', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1987

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, 'Genocide'. UK's *Sunday Times* published this report after Anthony Mascarenhas, the Pakistani journalist who filed the report had escaped to the UK along with his family.

<sup>33</sup> Document 19, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976, *South Asia Crisis, 1971*, Volume XI, (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 2005, 74. Blood was replaced soon after.

<sup>34</sup> Document 72. *Ibid.*, 210

<sup>35</sup> Pakistan: The Ravaging of Golden Bengal, *TIME*, August 2nd, 1971

Gandhi described Pakistan's "repressive, brutal and colonial policy" as having culminated in "genocide and massive violence"<sup>36</sup>.

*Denial.* The government of Pakistan explicitly denied that there was genocide. By their refusal to characterise the mass-killings as genocide or to condemn and restrain the Pakistani government, the US and Chinese governments implied that they did not consider it so. In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger, who was President Nixon's national security advisor in 1971, stops short of using the term<sup>37</sup>. According to him, Pakistan "had unquestionably acted unwisely, brutally and even immorally, though on a matter which under international law was clearly under its jurisdiction". As we shall discuss later, given their interests, none of these three governments—and their officials who were in charge of making decisions at that time—can be expected to accept the charges of genocide.

*Scholarly disputation.* Among scholars, the main arguments against describing the events of 1971 as genocide came from Richard Sisson and Leo E Rose in 1990. But as Donald Beachler argues<sup>38</sup>, the evidence for their assertion comes from interviews with Pakistani officers involved in Operation Searchlight and a reference to a book by Brigadier Siddiq Salik, the public relations officer of the Pakistan army's eastern command in Dhaka. More recently in 2005, Sarmila Bose argued<sup>39</sup> that "unsubstantiated sensationalism" marred systematic historical record-keeping in Bangladesh, and an "unhealthy victim culture...and people are instigated at the national level to engage in ghoulish competition with six million Jews in order to gain international attention". Motivated by her objectives to move Bangladesh and

Pakistan towards reconciliation, Bose assigns a broad moral equivalence between the various parties claiming that "the civil war of 1971 was fought between those who believed that they were fighting for a united Pakistan and those who believed...in an independent Bangladesh. Both were legitimate political positions".

Bose's arguments suffer from several weaknesses. First, they ignore the overwhelming body of evidence of the military government's use of mass-killings as a deliberate strategy to bring the Bengalis to heel. Diplomatic cables, newspaper reports, eyewitness accounts of refugees and foreign evacuees offer unimpeachable evidence of genocide. An investigation in 1972 by the International Commission of Jurists determined that genocide was indeed the case<sup>40</sup>.

What is in question is the death toll—between the much quoted figure of 3 million dead, 30 million displaced and half-a-million women raped (most Bangladeshi accounts) and an unlikely figure of 36,000 dead and a few hundreds raped (according to Bose and most Pakistani accounts)<sup>41 42</sup>. Indeed, has India not intervened in the conflict—first by supporting the *Mukti Bahini* insurgency and followed by a full-scale invasion—the death tolls might well have been higher.

Bose does not offer convincing arguments why the 'unhealthy' victim culture should cause one to ignore the body of evidence, comprising of historical accounts from non-Bangladeshi sources, that suggests that Bengalis were indeed victims of genocide. That the genocide took place in a context of civil war, communal riots (which include instances where Bengalis did the killing) and counter-genocide, should neither mitigate nor detract us from the fundamental

<sup>36</sup> Document 226. FRUS, Volume XI, 629

<sup>37</sup> Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, (Boston: Little, Brown 1979), 854

<sup>38</sup> Beachler, 'The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh'

<sup>39</sup> Sarmila Bose, 'Anatomy of Violence: Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 8th, 2005, 4463-4470

<sup>40</sup> Beachler, 'The politics of genocide scholarship: the case of Bangladesh'

<sup>41</sup> Kalyan Chaudhuri estimates that the number of Bengalis killed was at least 1,247,000 from newspaper accounts and government reports of the time. R J Rummel's analytical estimate of the number is 1.5 million. See Kalyan Chaudhuri, *Genocide in Bangladesh* (Bombay: Orient Longman 1972) and R J Rummel, *Death by Government*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers 1997)

<sup>42</sup> Gendercide Watch, 'Case Study: Genocide in Bangladesh, 1971'

conclusion that casts the Pakistan army as guilty of perpetrating genocide. Legitimacy of political positions is not a valid reason under the Genocide Convention to explain away the actions of the Pakistani government.

*It was genocide.* Beachler uses Robert Melson's definition of partial genocide<sup>43</sup> to argue that "there was no attempt to eliminate the entire population of East Pakistan". While this is accurate if Bengalis as a whole are taken as the targeted group, it can be argued that the genocide was total with respect to East Bengali Hindus: around 70% of the 10 million refugees in India were Bengali Hindus. In other words around 70% of East Pakistan's Hindu population (of about 10 million) had been expelled. If the result of the India-Pakistan war had been otherwise, and the refugees prevented from returning to their homes, the military establishment would have succeeded in its project to cleanse its eastern wing.

### A Realist explanation

*An excuse for non-intervention?* The Realist school of international relations defines "national interests" of states as their survival and security. Realists argue that the international system is anarchic, and, lacking a world government, sovereign states act to further their national interests by maximising their own power relative to others. States strive for and are sensitive to the stability of the balance of power. Moral issues like humanitarian intervention are contingent upon their being in the national interests of foreign players. Practitioners do not openly accept it, but states champion ideological and humanitarian causes to the extent they serve to preserve the balance of power or change it to a more advantageous position.

In *A Problem from Hell*, Samantha Power indicts the realist underpinnings of US foreign policy for its indirect complicity or reluctance to intervene in several 20th century genocides—

including those in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia<sup>44</sup>.

While that may indeed be the case, the events in East Pakistan between 1970, when *Bhola* struck, to 1974, when India, Pakistan and Bangladesh arrived at a tripartite agreement to close outstanding issues, present an interesting case of how realpolitik considerations of the states involved explain why genocide was carried out with impunity, why it was permitted by international players, why it was halted by the Indian intervention and why the perpetrators were never punished. The purpose of this section is not normative discussion to study how genocides may be prevented, but rather an attempt to explain the role of Realist foreign policies of states during the episode.

*A Cold War story.* In 1971, the United States and Pakistan were in the same Cold War camp. In addition to formal security alliances in the form of CENTO and SEATO, Pakistan was set to play an important role in stitching up a geopolitical alignment between its two main allies, the United States and China, who were not on talking terms at that time. The United States under President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor, saw a chance to seize the geopolitical advantage by reaching out to Communist China. Pakistan's military regime saw this as an opportunity to create obligations for itself in Washington and Beijing. The personal friendship between President Nixon and General Yahya (mirrored by the personal animosity between the US president and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) reinforced how the Nixon White House saw its interests in South Asia.

India was officially non-aligned but increasingly reliant on the Soviet Union for military and diplomatic support perceived both Pakistan and China as potential adversaries. At a popular level, India and the United States saw each other in positive light, but this did not translate into the geopolitical domain.

<sup>43</sup> Melson defines partial genocide as "mass murder in order to coerce and to alter the identity and politics of the group, not to destroy it". See Robert Melson, 'Modern genocide in Rwanda: ideology, revolution, war and mass murder in an African state', in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (eds), *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003)

<sup>44</sup> Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, (New York: HarperCollins 2003)

*Pakistani calculations.* The military government saw in the East Pakistan crisis a direct risk to its territorial integrity and indeed its survival as a state. It feared that India's intentions to dismember Pakistan would not stop with East Pakistan, but would extend to the western wing as well. But it could not afford to station the 300,000 troops that Gen Niazi later claimed<sup>45</sup> were necessary to pacify East Pakistan, without dangerously jeopardising the military balance on the western front. Knowing that it could rely on the United States and China to remain silent, if not lend their support, the military government calculated that the best chance it had to keep the country united, and dominated by the western wing, was to unleash a reign of terror. As indicated by the Realist view, Pakistan did what it thought it could get away with. In General Yahya's view, the genocide of Bengalis in East Pakistan was in Pakistan's national interest.

*America condoned.* As the documentary record shows, the Nixon administration viewed the conflict in Pakistan entirely through the Cold War prism. It felt that the emergence of an independent Bangladesh would swing the balance of power decisively in India's (and thereby the Soviet Union's) favour. He believed that the victory of India over Pakistan was the same as the victory of the Soviet Union over China. In the middle of the crisis, in July 1971, Pakistan arranged for Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing, cementing its position as a key channel of communication between the United States and China. US foreign policy, therefore, famously "tilted" towards Pakistan.

*The tilted game.* The tilt was manifested in a stubborn refusal to condemn General Yahya's regime for its brazen violation of human rights, covert attempts to split the Awami League-led rebel government, dubious arms transfers, redirection of US-made fighter aircraft to Pakistan through Iran and Jordan, and finally the dispatch of a aircraft carrier task force into the Bay of Bengal during the India-Pakistan war

in December. Foreign Minister Swaran Singh was not far off the mark when he accused the United States of condoning the genocide. There was also widespread domestic criticism in the United States. Kissinger himself justifies the Nixon administration's policy as resulting from being "torn between conflicting imperatives". Christopher Hitchens, a contemporary critic, argues that the need for secret diplomacy with Beijing was mainly dictated by domestic politics and that even so, an alternative route to China existed through Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator<sup>46</sup>.

*Indian calculations.* India was opposed to East Bengal's secession as late as March 1971<sup>47</sup>, fearing that Bengali nationalism could raise the banner of secession in its own state of West Bengal. The Indian government feared that a war with Pakistan would also involve China and a three-front war which it could not win. In this context, India's initial approach up to April 1971 was to avoid direct intervention to prevent the genocide.

*Refugee crisis.* It was only when the influx of refugees threatened to place the Indian government's finances at risk and precipitate a demographic change in the sensitive North East of the country that India's attitude changed. The concern was no longer a theoretical risk of West Bengal seceding. It was an immediate and growing threat to India's own security. Seeing that intervention would be necessary and another war with Pakistan was imminent, the Indian government proceeded to court the Soviet Union for a security guarantee that would prevent China's entry into the war in support of Pakistan. The Indian army was unwilling to intervene until it was fully prepared and certainly not until after the monsoon. From May to early December, India extended diplomatic support to the rebel Bangladesh government, armed and trained *Mukti Bahini* fighters and conducted covert operations against Pakistani forces in East Bengal.

<sup>45</sup> AAK Niazi's interview with Hamid Mir, 2004

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, (London: Verso 2001), 44-54

<sup>47</sup> Documents from March and April 1971, FRUS, Vol XI

*Indian prepares for war.* By November, India had concluded a mutual security treaty with the Soviet Union, the *Mukti Bahini* had supported had weakened Pakistani army positions in East Bengal, and its own armed forces were prepared to go to war. The opportunity came when General Yahya ordered pre-emptive strikes on Indian airfields along the western border on December 3rd. The war lasted for two weeks, and ended with the Pakistani surrender to joint India-Bangladesh forces on December 16th. A case can be made therefore, that India was led to intervene in East Bengal more to protect its own interests than out of humanitarian concern for the Bengalis. Further, it could only intervene because it was successful in creating a balance of power that allowed it.

*The UN failed.* All through the conflict, the United Nations was spectacularly ineffective in preventing the genocide. The events in the subcontinent were predominantly shaped by the interests and the actions of the great powers. On December 7th, soon after the outbreak of war, the UN General Assembly voted 104 to 11 against (with 10 abstentions) "calling for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of troops. The overwhelming vote reflected the opposition by most states to the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan and India's armed intervention. Many of them were no doubt anxious to discourage dissident minorities in their own states from taking the same course."<sup>48</sup>

*Bangladeshi calculations.* At the end of the war India took over 90,000 Pakistani soldiers as prisoners of war. Bangladesh had around 600,000 non-Bengalis of which it wanted to expel 260,000 to Pakistan. Pakistan had detained over 400,000 Bengalis which it wanted to repatriate to the newly created republic of Bangladesh<sup>49</sup>. Given the circumstances surrounding its creation, Pakistan, China, the United States and the Islamic countries were

unwilling to recognise Bangladesh. Pakistan's recognition became crucial for the new nation to gain international recognition. Bhutto, who had succeeded General Yahya as president wanted to secure the return of Pakistani territory and prisoners of war and also to avoid Pakistani army officials from being put on trial for war crimes in Bangladesh. India determined to use its military victory over Pakistan to settle its outstanding disputes with Pakistan, including the territorial dispute over Kashmir. Although the Simla Agreement of 1972 decided on the contours of a settlement, the negotiations over the POWs and exchange of populations dragged on until August 1973.

Bangladesh's new government acutely felt the need for international recognition, not least because it was substantially dependent on foreign aid. In a grand tri-partite bargain, the three countries decided that India would release the POWs, Pakistan would recognise Bangladesh, repatriate the Bengalis on its territory and admit a number of Biharis. Bangladesh, which had by then reduced the number of Pakistanis it wanted to put on trial for war crimes from 1500 to 195, agreed to drop its demands entirely. It was realpolitik that struck the final blow in the East Pakistan genocide by allowing the key perpetrators to escape trial and punishment.

### **In the shadow of the tragedy**

The Hamoodur Rahman commission, tasked by the Bhutto government to investigate Pakistan's military collapsed exonerated key players in the genocide, including Gen Tikka Khan, who came to be called the "Butcher of Dhaka" for his role in Operation Searchlight, and Gen Rao Farman Ali<sup>50</sup>, the military commander of Dhaka accused of ordering the killings of Bengali intellectuals in the closing days of the war. After the violent reprisals in the immediate aftermath of the war, Bangladesh did

<sup>48</sup> International Commission of Jurists, *The Events in East Pakistan, 1971*, available at [http://www.globalwebpost.com/genocide1971/docs/jurists/1\\_preface.htm](http://www.globalwebpost.com/genocide1971/docs/jurists/1_preface.htm) accessed on March 10th 2008

<sup>49</sup> S. M. Burke, 'The Postwar Diplomacy of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 11, Nov. 1973, 1036-1049

<sup>50</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh*

not put any of the alleged collaborators on trial either.

*The legacy of the genocide.* Of all the parties involved in the East Pakistan crisis, the ones that got the short shrift were the 'Biharis' stranded in Bangladesh. Left behind in squalid camps as Pakistan refused to admit them, the number of people technically awaiting repatriation had grown to between 250,000 to 300,000 by 2004<sup>51</sup>.

They live in 66 camps in 13 regions across the country. While their status remains an open issue between Pakistan and Bangladesh, they live in a legal limbo: Bangladesh is reluctant to accord them citizenship rights, while Pakistan's refusal to accept them underlies its own fragile ethnic composition.

*No truth, no reconciliation.* The Bengali victims of the genocide did not get the closure of

bringing the perpetrators to justice. Instead, the trajectory of Bangladeshi politics—split between Bengali nationalism and Islam, as well as the extreme partisanship between the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party—ironically resulted in the pro-Pakistan and *razakar* elements not merely avoiding punishment but acquiring political power.

The government's failure to deliver justice led to what Bose calls a "cottage industry of war memoirs" as well as civil society attempts to indict war criminals in people's tribunals. Far from leading to closure, these attempts have only added another dimension to Bangladesh's political faultlines. The political legacy of the genocide continues to plague Bangladeshi society and politics.

---

<sup>51</sup> Refugees International, 'Visual Mission: The Stateless Bihari of Bangladesh', <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/report/detail/4942/> accessed on March 8th 2008