

Eyewitness Accounts: Genocide in Bangladesh

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in Samuel Totten, et al.

***Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views***

New York: Garland Publishing, 1997

Chapter 10, pp. 291-316

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The following eyewitness accounts of the 1971 genocide depict different incidents. The first two eyewitness accounts describe the mass murders committed on March 25 night on Dhaka University campus. The first account is by a survivor of the killings in one of the student dormitories (Jagannath Hall) where Hindu students lived. The second account is by a university professor who witnessed and videotaped the massacres on Dhaka University campus. The third and fourth eyewitness testimonies describe the mass rape of women by the Pakistanis. The fifth testimony describes the killings in the village of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the nationalist movement. The last account describes the atrocities of the non-Bengali Biharis who collaborated with the Pakistan army. The testimonies are taken from two sources; one is a Bengali book entitled *1971: Terrible Experiences* (Dhaka: Jatiya Shahitya Prakasheni, 1989), which was edited by Rashid Haider and is a collection of eyewitness accounts. Sohela Nazneen translated the accounts from Bengali to English. The other source, *The Year of the Vulture* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1972), is an Indian journalist's (Arnita Malik) account of the genocide. In the Malik book Dhaka is spelled as Dacca, which was the spelling used in 1972.

## Massacre at Jagannath Hall

This testimony is from Kali Ranjansheel's, "Jagannath Hall e-Chilam" ["I was at Jagannath Hall"], in Rashid Haider (ed.), 1971: *Vayabaha Ovigayata* [1971: Terrible Experiences] Dhaka: Jatiya Shahitya Prakasheni, 1989, p. 5. It was translated by Sohela Nazneen. Reprinted with permission.

I was a student at the Dhaka University. I used to live in room number 235 (South Block) in Jagannath Hall. On the night of 25th of March I woke up from sleep by the terrifying sound of gunfire. Sometimes the sound of gunfire would be suppressed by the sound of bomb explosions and shell-fire. I was so terrified that I could not even think of what I should do! After a while I thought about going to Shusil, assistant general secretary of the student's union. I crawled up the stairs very slowly to the third floor. I found out that some students had already taken refuge in Shusil's room, but he was not there. The students told me to go to the roof of the building where many other students had taken shelter but I decided (rather selfishly) to stay by myself I crawled to the rest rooms at the northern end of the third floor and took refuge in there. I could see the East, the South and the West from the window. I could see that the soldiers were searching for students with flashlights from room to room, were taking them near the Shahid Minar (Martyr's memorial) and then shooting them. Only the sound of gunfire and pleas of mercy filled the air. Sometimes the Pakistanis used mortars and were shelling the building. The tin sheds in front of assembly and some of the rooms in North Block were set on fire. ...

After some time about forty to fifty Pakistani soldiers came to the South Block and broke down the door of the dining room. The lights were turned on and they were firing at the students who took shelter in that room. ...When the soldiers came out they had Priyanath (the caretaker of the student dormitory) at gunpoint, and forced him to show the way through all the floors of the dormitory. During this time I was not able to see them as I left the restroom by climbing up the open window and took shelter on the sunshed of the third floor. But I could hear the cracking sounds of bullets, the students pleading for mercy and the sound of the soldiers rummaging and throwing things about in search of valuables. The soldiers did not see me on the sunshed.

...After they left I again took refuge in the washroom. I peeked through the window and saw that the other students' dormitory, Salimullah Hall, was on fire. The Northern and the Eastern parts of the city was on fire too as the North and East horizon had turned red. The whole night the Pakistani soldiers continued their massacre and destruction. ...Finally I heard the call for the morning prayer. ...

...The curfew was announced at dawn and I thought that this merciless killing would stop. But it continued. The soldiers started killing those who had escaped their notice during the night before.

...It was morning and I heard the voices of some students. I came out of the washroom, and saw that the students were carrying a body downstairs while soldiers with machine guns were accompanying them. It was the dead body of Priyanath. I was ordered to help the students and I complied. We carried bodies from the dormitory rooms and piled them up in the field outside.

There were a few of us there-students, gardeners, two sons of the gates-keeper and the rest were janitors. The janitors requested the Pakistanis to let them go since they were not Bengalis. After a while the army separated the janitors from us.

...All the time the soldiers were cursing and swearing at us. The soldiers said "We will see how you get free Bangladesh! Why don't you shout *Joy Bangla* (Victory to Bengal)!" The soldiers also kicked us around. After we had finished carrying the bodies, we were divided into groups. They then took my group to one of the university quarters and searched almost every room on the fourth floor and looted the valuables. Downstairs we saw dead bodies piled up, obviously victims from the night before. They also brought down the flag of Bangladesh.

...After we came back, we were again ordered to carry the dead bodies to the Shahid Minar. The soldiers had already piled up the bodies of their victims and we added others bodies to the piles. If we felt tired and slowed down, the soldiers threatened to kill us-

...As my companion and I were carrying the body of Sunil (our dormitory guard), we heard screams in female voices. We found that the women from the nearby slums were screaming as the soldiers were shooting at the janitors (the husbands of the women). I realized that our turn would come too as the Pakistanis started lining up those students who were before us, and were firing at them. My companion and I barely carried the dead body of Sunil toward a pile where I saw the dead body of Dr. Dev [Professor of Philosophy]. I cannot explain why I did what I did next. Maybe from pure fatigue or maybe from a desperate hope to survive!

I lay down beside the dead body of Dr. Dev while still holding onto the corpse of Sunil. I kept waiting for the soldiers to shoot me. I even thought that I had died. After a long time I heard women and children crying. I opened my eyes and saw that the army had left and the dead bodies were still lying about and women were crying. Some of the people were still alive but wounded. All I wanted to do was to get away from the field and survive.

I crawled towards the slums. First I went to the house of the electrician. I asked for water but when I asked for shelter, his wife started crying aloud and I then left and took refuge in a restroom. ...Suddenly I heard the voice of Idu who used to sell old books. He said,

"Don't be afraid. I heard you are alive, I shall escort you to safety." I went to old Dhaka city. Then I crossed the river. The boatman did not take any money. From there, I first went to Shimulia, then, Nawabganj and finally I reached my village in Barishal in the middle of April.

## **Horror Documentary**

This testimony is from Amita Malik's *The Year of the Vulture* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1972, pp. 79-83).

At the professors' funeral, Professor Rafiq-ul-Islam of the Bengali Department whispered to me, "At the television station you will find that there is a film record of the massacre of professors and students at Jagannath Hall. Ask them to show it to you."

This sounded so incredible that I did not really believe it. However, I wasted no time in asking Mr. Jamil Chowdhury, the station manager of TV, whether he did, indeed, have such a film with him. "Oh yes," he said, "but we have not shown it yet because it might have dreadful repercussions." He was, of course, referring to the fact that the

Pakistani army was still very much in Dacca in prisoner-of-war camps in the Cantonment, and it would have been dangerous to show them gunning down professors and students at Dacca University. The people of Dacca had shown tremendous restraint so far, but this would have been going a bit too far. However, I had it confirmed that N.B.C. VISNEWS and other international networks had already obtained and projected the film.

"But who shot the film?" I asked in wonder. "A professor at the University of Engineering, who had a video tape-recorder and whose flat overlooks the grounds of Jagannath Hall," said Mr. Chowdhury. It was therefore by kind courtesy of Dacca TV that I sat in their small projection room on January 5 and saw for the first time what must be a unique actuality film, something for the permanent archives of world history.

The film, lasting about 20 minutes, first shows small distant figures emerging from the hall carrying the corpses of what must be the students and professors massacred in Jagannath Hall. These are clearly civilian figures in lighter clothes and, at their back, seen strutting arrogantly even at that distance, are darker clad figures, the hoodlums of the Pakistan army. The bodies are laid down in neat, orderly rows by those forced to carry them at gun-point. Then the same procession troops back to the Hall. All this time, with no other sound, one hears innocent bird-song and a lazy cow is seen grazing on the university lawns. The same civilians come out again and the pile of bodies grows.

But after the third grisly trip, the action changes. After the corpses are laid on the ground, the people carrying them are lined up. One of them probably has a pathetic inkling of what is going to happen. He falls on his knees and clings to the legs of the nearest soldier, obviously pleading for mercy. But there is no mercy. One sees guns being pointed, one hears the crackle of gunfire and the lined up figures fall one by one, like the proverbial house of cards or, if you prefer, puppets in a children's film. At this stage, the bird-song suddenly stops. The lazy cow, with calf, careers wildly across the lawn and is joined by a whale herd of cows fleeing in panic.

But the last man is still clinging pathetically to the jack-boot of the soldier at the end of the row. The soldier then lifts his shoulder at an angle, so that the gun points almost perpendicularly downwards to the man at his feet, and shoots him. The pleading hands unlink from the soldier's legs and another corpse joins the slumped bodies in a row, some piled on top of the very corpses they had to carry out at gunpoint, their own colleagues and friends. The soldiers prod each body with their rifles or bayonets to make sure that they are dead. A few who are still wriggling in their death agony are shot twice until they also stop wriggling.

At this stage, there is a gap, because Professor Nurul Ullah's film probably ran out and he had to load a new one. But by the time he starts filming again, nothing much has changed except that there is a fresh pile of bodies on the left. No doubt some other students and professors had been forced at gun-point to carry them out and then were executed in turn. In so far as one can count the bodies, or guess roughly at their number in what is really a continuous long-shot amateur film, there are about 50 bodies by this time. And enough, one should think.

Professor Nurul Ullah's world scoop indicated that he was a remarkable individual who through his presence of mind, the instinctive reaction of a man of science, had succeeded in shooting a film with invaluable documentary evidence regardless of the risk to his life.

I immediately arranged to trace him down and he very kindly asked me to come round to his flat. Professor Nurul Ullah is a Professor of Electricity at the University of Engineering in Dacca. I found him to be a quiet, scholarly, soft-spoken, and surprisingly young man with a charming wife. He is normally engrossed in his teaching and students. But he happened to be the proud possessor of a video tape-recorder which he bought in Japan on his way back from a year at an American university. He is perhaps the only man alive who saw the massacre on the lawns of Dacca University on the first day of the Pakistani army crack-down. He took his film at great risk to his personal life. It was fascinating to sit down in Professor Nurul Ullah's sitting room and see the film twice with him, the second time after he had shown me the bedroom window at the back of his flat which overlooked both the street along which the soldiers drove to the university and the university campus. When he realized what was happening, he slipped his microphone outside [through] the window to record the sounds of firing. The film was shot from a long distance and under impossible conditions. Professor Nurul Ullah's description of how he shot the film was as dramatic and stirring as the film itself:

"On March 25, 1971, the day of the Pakistani crack-down, although I knew nothing about it at the time, my wife and I had just had breakfast and I was looking out of my back windows in the professors' block of flats in which I and my colleagues from the Engineering University live with our families. Our back windows overlook a street across which are the grounds of Jagannath Hall, one of the most famous halls of Dacca University. I saw an unusual sight, soldiers driving past my flat and going along the street which overlooks it, towards the entrance to the University. As curfew was on, they made announcements on loudspeakers from a jeep that people coming out on the streets would be shot. After a few minutes, I saw some people carrying out what were obviously dead bodies from Jagannath Hall. I immediately took out my loaded video tape recorder and decided to shoot a film through the glass of the window. It was not an ideal way to do it, but I was not sure what it was all about, and what with the curfew and all the tension, we were all being very cautious. As I started shooting the film, the people carrying out the dead bodies laid them down on the grass under the supervision of Pakistani soldiers who are distinguishable in the film, because of their dark clothes, the weapons they are carrying and the way they are strutting about contrasted with the civilians in lighter clothes who are equally obviously drooping with fright. ♦As soon as firing started, I carefully opened the bedroom window wide enough for me to slip my small microphone just outside the window so that I could record the sound as well. But it was not very satisfactorily done, as it was very risky. My wife now tells me that she warned me at the time: ~re you mad, do you want to get shot too? One flash from your camera and they will kill us too.' But I don't remember her telling me, I must have been very absorbed in my shooting, and she says I took no notice of what she said.

"It so happened that a few days earlier, from the same window I had shot some footage of student demonstrators on their way to the university. I little thought it would end this way.

"Anyway, this macabre procession of students carrying out bodies and laying them down on the ground was repeated until we realized with horror that the same students were themselves being lined up to be shot. After recording this dreadful sight on my video tape-recorder, I shut it off thinking it was all over only to realize that a fresh batch of university people were again carrying out bodies from inside. By the time I got my video tape-recorder going again, I had missed this new grisly procession but you will notice in the film that the pile of bodies is higher.

"I now want to show my film all over the world, because although their faces are not identifiable from that distance in what is my amateur film, one can certainly see the difference between the soldiers and their victims, one can see the shooting and hear it, one can see on film what my wife and I actually saw with our own eyes. And that is documentary evidence of the brutality of the Pak army and their massacre of the intellectuals."

## **Our Mothers and Sisters**

The following testimony is from M. Akhtaurzaman Mondol's "Amader-Ma Bon" ("Our Mother and Sisters") which appears in Rashid Haider (Ed.) 1971: *Terrible Experiences*, p. 197. It was translated by Sohela Nazneen. Reprinted with permission.

We started our fight to liberate Vurungamari from the Pakistani occupation forces on November 11, 1971. We started attacking from West, North and East simultaneously. The Indian air forces bombed the Pakistani stronghold on November 11 morning. On November 13 we came near the outskirts of Vurungamari, and the Indian air force intensified their air attack. On November 14 morning the guns from the Pakistani side fell silent and we entered Vurungamari with shouts of "Joy Bangla" (victory to Bangladesh). The whole town was quiet. We captured fifty to sixty Pakistani soldiers. They had no ammunition left. We found the captain of the Pakistan forces, captain Ataulah Khan, dead in the bunker. He still had his arms around a woman-both died in the bomb attack in the bunker. The woman had marks of torture all over her body. We put her in a grave.

But I still did not anticipate the terrible scene I was going to witness and we were heading toward east of Vurungamari to take up our positions. I was informed by wireless to go to the Circle Officer's office. After we reached the office, we caught glimpses of several young women through the windows of the second floor. The doors were locked, so we had to break them down. After breaking down the door of the room, where the women were kept, we were dumbfounded. We found four naked young women, who had been physically tortured, raped, and battered by the Pakistani soldiers. We immediately came out of the room and threw in four lungis [dresses] and four bedsheets for them to cover themselves. We tried to talk to them, but all of them were still in shock. One of them was six to seven months pregnant. One was a college student from Mymensingh. They were taken to India for medical treatment in a car owned by the Indian army. We found many dead bodies and skeletons in the bushes along the road. Many of the skeletons had long hair and had on torn saris and bangles on their hands. We found sixteen other women locked up in a room at Vurungamari High School. These women were brought in for the Pakistani soldiers from nearby villages. We found evidence in the rooms of the Circle Officers office which showed that these women were tied to the windowbars and were repeatedly raped by the Pakistani soldiers. The whole floor was covered with blood, torn pieces of clothing, and strands of long hair. ...

### **The Officer's Wife**

This testimony is from Amita Malik's *The Year of the Vulture*, pp. 141-42.

Another pathetic case is that of a woman of about 25. Her husband was a government officer in a subdivision and she has three children. They first took away the husband, although she cried and pleaded with them. Then they returned him half-dead, after brutal torture. Then another lot of soldiers came in at 8 or 9 A.M. and raped her in front of her husband and children. They tied up the husband and hit the children when they cried.

Then another lot of soldiers came at 2.30 P.M. and took her away. They kept her in a bunker and used to rape her every night until she became senseless. When she returned after three months, she was pregnant. The villagers were very sympathetic about her but the husband refused to take her back. When the villagers kept on pressing him to take her back, he hanged himself. She is now in an advanced stage of pregnancy and we are doing all that we can do to help her. But she is inconsolable. She keeps on asking, "But why, why did they do it? It would have been better if we had both died."

### **The Maulvi's Story**

This testimony appears in Arnica Malik's *The Year of the Vulture*, pp. 102-104.

On April 19, 1971, about 35 soldiers came to our village in a launch at about 8 A.M. A couple of days earlier, I had asked the Sheikh's father and mother to leave the village, but they refused. They said, "This is our home and we shall not go away." Soon after I heard the sound of the launch, a soldier came running and said, "Here Maulvi, stop, in which house are the father and mother of the Sheikh?" So first I brought out his father. We placed a chair for him but they made him sit on the ground. Then Sheikh Sahib's amma [mother] was brought out. She took hold of my hand and I made her sit on the chair. The soldiers then held a sten-gun against the back of the Sheikh's abba [father] and a rifle against mine. "We will kill you in 10 minutes," said a soldier looking at his watch.

Then they picked up a diary from the Sheikh's house and some medicine bottles and asked me for the keys of the house. I gave them the bunch of keys but they were so rough in trying to open the locks that the keys would not turn. So they kicked open the trunks. There was nothing much inside except five teaspoons, which they took. They saw a framed photograph and asked me whose it was. When I said it was Sheikh Sahib's, they took it down. I tried to get up at this stage but they hit me with their rifle butts and I fell down against the chair. Finally, they picked up a very old suitcase and a small wooden box and made a servant carry them to the launch.

Then they dragged me up to where the Sheikh's father was sitting and repeated, "We shall shoot you in 10 minutes." Pointing to the Sheikh's father, I asked: "What's the point of shooting him? He's an old man and a government pensioner." The soldiers replied, "Is lire, keonki wohne shaitan paida kira hai" ["Because he has produced a devil."]. "Why shoot me, the imam of the mosque?" I asked. ♦Aap kiska imam hai? Aap vote dehte hain" ["What sort of an imam are you? You vote."], they replied. I said: "The party was not banned, we were allowed to vote for it. We are not leaders, we are janasadharan [the masses]. Why don't you ask the leaders?" The captain intervened to say that eight minutes were over and we would be shot in another two minutes. Just then a major came running from the launch and said we were to be let alone and not shot.

I immediately went towards the masjid (mosque) and saw about 50 villagers inside. Three boys had already been dragged out and shot. The soldiers asked me about a boy who, I said, was a krishak (cultivator). They looked at the mud on his legs and hands and let him go. Khan Sahib, the Sheikh's uncle, had a boy servant called Ershad. They asked me about him. I said he was a servant. But a Razakar mauarvi, who had come with them from another village, said he was the Sheikh's relative, which was a lie. The boy Ershad was taken to the lineup. He asked for water but it was refused.

Another young boy had come from Dacca, where he was employed in a mill, to enquire about his father. He produced his identity card but they shot him all the same. They shot Ershad right in front of his mother. Ershad moved a little after falling down so they shot him again. Finally, the boy who had carried the boxes to the launch was shot. With the three shot earlier, a total of six innocent boys were shot by the Pakistani army without any provocation. They were all good-looking and therefore suspected to be relatives of the Sheikh.

After this, the Sheikh's father and mother were brought out of the house. Amma was almost fainting. And the house was set on fire and burnt down in front of our eyes until all that remained was the frame of the doorway which you can still see. Altonissa, the lady with the blood-stained clothes of her son, is the mother of Torab Yad Ali who was shot. They did not allow her to remove her son's body for burial, because they wanted the bodies to be exposed to public view to terrorize the villagers. They also shot Mithu, the 10-year old son of this widowed lady. She had brought him up with the greatest difficulty—they never had anything to eat except saag-bhaat (spinach and rice). They shot little Mithu because he had helped the Mukti Bahini. You can now ask the ladies about their narrow escape.

Shaheeda Sheikh, Sheikh Mujib's niece, then added that fortunately all the women were taken away to safety across the river to a neighbouring village three days before the Pakistani soldiers came. For months they had lived in constant terror of Razakars pouncing on them from bushes by the village pond. Beli Begum, Mujib's niece, a strikingly lovely woman, told me how she had fled from the village when seven months pregnant and walked 25 miles to safety. Pari, a girl cousin, escaped with a temperature of 104 degrees. Otherwise they would all have been killed.

### **Massacre at Faiz Lake**

This testimony is from Abdul Gofran's "Faiz Lake-Gonohataya" ("Massacreat Faiz Lake"), which first appeared in Rashid Haider (ed.), **1971: Terrible Experiences**. It was translated by Sohela Nazneen.

I own a shop near Akbar Shah mosque in Pahartali. On November 10th, 1971, at 6. A.M. about forty to fifty Biharis came to my shop and forced me to accompany them. I had to comply as any form of resistance would have been useless against such a large number of people. They took me to Faiz Lake. As we passed through the gates of Faiz Lake I saw that hundreds of non-Bengalis had assembled near the Pump house and wireless colony. The Bengalis who had been brought in were tied up. They were huddled by the side of the lake which was at the north side of the Pump-house. Many of the Biharis were carrying knives, swords and other sharp instruments. The Biharis were first kicking and beating up the Bengalis brutally and then were shoving their victims towards towards those carrying weapons. These other group of armed Biharis were then jabbing their victims in the stomach and then severing their heads with the swords. I witnessed several groups of Bengalis being killed in such a manner. ...When the Biharis came for me one of them took away my sweater. I hen punched him and jumped into the lake. ...I swam to the other side and hid among the bushes. ... The Biharis came to look for me but I was fortunate and barely escaped their notice. From my hiding place I witnessed the mass murder that was taking place. Many Bengalis were killed in the manner which had been described earlier.

The massacre went on till about two o'clock in the afternoon. After they had disposed off the last Bengal victim, the Biharis brought in a group of ten to twelve Bengali men. It was evident from their gestures that they were asking the Bengalis to dig a grave for the bodies lying about. I also understood from their gestures that the Biharis were promising the group that if they completed the task they would be allowed to go free. The group complied to their wish. After the group had finished burying the bodies, they were also killed, and the Biharis went away rejoicing. There were still many dead bodies thrown around the place.

In the afternoon many Biharis and [the] Pakistani army went along that road. But the Pakistani soldiers showed no sign of remorse. They seemed rather happy and did nothing to bury the dead.