

**Focus**  
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non-Bengalis in 1971**

**Maryam Mastoor**

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## Introduction

On 16<sup>th</sup> December 1971, Pakistan got dismembered. East Pakistan became Bangladesh. Owing to disproportionate handling of East Pakistan by West Pakistan, there was utmost resentment in the former. The reasons for dissatisfaction ranged from economic to political and social factors. Some 2.5 billion dollars earned from export of jute and jute-related goods produced in East Pakistan were transferred to West Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> In total, East Pakistan's exports constituted 60 to 70 per cent of the State's revenue, and it received just 25-30 per cent of the country's income. In addition, nearly two third of the US aid was disbursed in West Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> Most of the industrial capitalists from India, who had migrated to Pakistan, were settled in Karachi (i.e., West Pakistan). Therefore, the Ayub administration's main focus on industrial development was of little or no significance for the highly agrarian society of East Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> In addition to economic disparity, the discord over recognition of Bengali as a national language added fire to the fury.

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Due to East Pakistan's larger population compared to West Pakistan, the 1971 election results were unfavorable for the political party based in West Pakistan. The Awami League, led by Bengali politician Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won the majority of seats. West Pakistan was unwilling to accept the leadership of a Bengali leader. Consequently, General Yahya Khan refused to convene the first session of the National Assembly on March 1<sup>st</sup>.

There was sudden a backlash in East Pakistan. A movement of civil disobedience was in place. The West Pakistan was losing control of East Pakistan. Therefore, on the eve of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971, Operation Searchlight was launched in East Pakistan. According to various sources, there had been casualties of non-combatants in the operation. In addition to Bengalis, non-Bengalis were also subjected to violence. The question that how non Bengalis were treated during the crisis, remains unaddressed in the existing literature. There is A dearth of research on a subject of violence against non-Bengalis during the 1971 war. Most of the literature produced on 1971 deliberates upon political turmoil in East Pakistan, which eventually became violent and Bangladesh came into existence. The second strand of literature deals with the number of casualties during the conflict. The third strand, though important, yet with minimal presence, is related to violence against the non-Bengali population. The East Pakistan tragedy is multifaceted. Indeed, it was an outcry against repressive regime of a military dictator, but it was also a highly misunderstood debacle. The victims of this tragedy were not Bengalis alone.

Since it was an uprising based on ethnicity, therefore, non-Bengalis were treated as outcastes. Ethnic conflict operates on asymmetries. In addition to a military crackdown on Bengalis, there was an equally fierce crackdown of Bengalis over the non-

Bengalis. Non-Bengalis were a minority in comparison with Bengalis. According to R.J Rummel, a historian from the US, nearly 150,000 Biharis were killed by Bengalis in March 1971.<sup>4</sup>

Since most of the literature is filled with a largely touted narrative created by Bengalis, it requires effort to see how non-Bengalis were treated in the crisis of East Pakistan. Sharmila Bose's book, *Dead Reckoning*,<sup>5</sup> says that one of the bloodiest wars in the past half-century has been "dominated by the narrative of the victorious side." While commenting on the conflict in East Pakistan, she writes that both sides in the conflict "are still imprisoned by wartime partisan myths." The introduction of her book does not exonerate Pakistani troops from committing atrocities during Bangladesh's bloody struggle for freedom. However, it is pertinent to see that she reached an extremely controversial conclusion, by saying that Bengalis - fighting for and against independence - also committed "appalling atrocities."<sup>6</sup> In a book, *Behind the Myth of 3 Million* <sup>7</sup> by a Bangladeshi historian, Dr M. Abdul Mu'min Chowdhury, the author revealed that blame on Pakistani forces of killing 3 million people is highly inflated. He has given various references in his book to substantiate his argument.

In Yasmin Saikia's "Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh"<sup>8</sup> Saikia points out, that "the rajakar 'Other' is not an easily identifiable category but generally pro-Pakistan Bengalis and ordinary Urdu-speaking people, who are commonly referred to as Bihari due to their affinity with Urdu-speaking Pakistanis."<sup>9</sup> She says that they were brutally killed by Bengali nationalists. She also laments that the Pakistan military did nothing to stop the massacres of Biharis "as they unfolded, it (Pakistan army) later used the atrocities as war propaganda to legitimate its own dirty

colonial war in the East. After the war, Biharis became “stateless refugees,” and were kept, “in a state of exception.”<sup>10</sup> Qutubuddin Aziz, in ‘Blood and Tears’<sup>11</sup>, documented 170 eye-witness accounts of the ‘atrocities committed on Biharis and other non-Bengalis’ across 55 towns, covering ‘110 places’ where many innocent people were massacred.<sup>12</sup>

There is a serious gap in literature on the atrocities committed by Mukti Bahni. However, there are few articles that can be mentioned. *When Bangladeshi Mukti Bahini Massacred Pro-Pakistan Bihari Community During 1971 War*<sup>13</sup> appeared in *Eurasian Review*. It talks about the atrocities of Mukti Bahini. *Bangladesh: War of liberation*, a report produced by World Peace Foundation, also deliberates upon atrocities committed by Bengalis against non-Bengalis.<sup>14</sup>

It is imperative to note that except for these works, there are close to no systematic studies available on the subject of violence against non-Bengalis. However, these accounts do, to some extent, prove the notion that Bengalis were ‘not’ the only victims in all occurrences of violence during the East Pakistan crisis.

## **Background**

The officers of the Pakistan army who were of non-Bengali origin and Biharis who lived there in East Pakistan were subjected to violence and subsequent killings by the Bengali nationals during the East Pakistan crisis. Those who believed that East Pakistan was a homogenous society were mistaken. It was diverse.

Among those who went to East Pakistan were many Urdu-speaking Muslims. They were generally regarded as Biharis,

although only a part came from Bihar. In 1947, over one million Biharis migrated to East Bengal. According to the 1951 census, 671,000 Bihari refugees were in East Pakistan, and by 1961, this number had risen to 850,000. Estimates indicate that about 1.5 million Muslims migrated from West Bengal and Bihar in the first two decades after partition. Most Biharis were educated and hardworking, filling roles left by Hindus who moved to India in 1947. Consequently, many Biharis held important governmental positions in Pakistan. However, due to language differences, assimilation of Biharis with Bengalis was challenging in areas with large Bihari populations, leading to hostility and resentment between the two ethnic communities.

Initially after partition, the local Bengali population warmly welcomed the migrants. But the language issue was a distinct indicator of discord between the Bengali-speaking 'locals' and the Urdu-speaking 'migrants'. Gradually, Bengalis began to look at Biharis as the 'looters' and 'plunderers' of the local resources of their territory. In addition to Urdu speaking Biharis, Muslims of non Benglai origin who had migrated from the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pardesh after the partition of India were also collectively referred to as "Biharis' by the Bengali population of East Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

The conflict at that time was multifaceted. It included a rebellion of Bengalis against the armed forces of Pakistan who were non Bengalis, assault of armed forces of Pakistan against the belligerent groups and mob violence of Bengalis against the pro Pakistan Bengalis but also against non-Bengalis. It is to be noted that non Bengalis were most often 'perceived' as pro Pakistanis and hence were subjected to violence.

During these turbulent times, the Mukti Bahini, a force of belligerent Bengalis, who was supported by India's secret agency RAW, killed Biharis. It is reported that "the Mukti Bahini killed anywhere from 100,000 Biharis<sup>16</sup> to 150,000 Biharis."<sup>17</sup> The following portions of the paper discusses violence against Biharis and other non-Bengalis.

### **Violence against Non-Bengalis**

Following the elections in 1971 a rampage of blood and violence was witnessed in East Pakistan, in which most of the innocent non-combatant civilians were targeted and killed. Minutes after General Yahya's announcement of postponement of National Assembly Session on March 1<sup>st</sup> angry mob of Bengalis swelled the streets of Dhaka. Peddy Durdin, an American journalist described this moment of the past in the following words:

"The high pitched fervor of sometimes turned xenophobic not only against West Pakistanis – who were killed on the streets and in their homes and often had their shops looted –but against Europeans. At the Intercontinental Hotel, Awami League gangs tore down all English signs, including the name of the hotel in electric lettering high up on one side of the building. A shot was fired through a lobby window and such hostility was shown for some days towards foreigners that the Swiss Manager of the Hotel closed the swimming pool and asked all guests to stay in their rooms except for meals. These, because the strike and transport difficulties had depleted staff, became self-service repasts consisting chiefly of rice and several kinds of curries."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the attacks on armed forces and non-Bengalis, Biharis were ferociously targeted. It is reported that

Bihari were favoured by the Pakistan army because they had a strong stance against the Hindus. They also worked as informants for the Pakistan army against the operations of Mukti Bahini. On March 1, 1971 when Sheikh Mujib gave a call of shutter down, the government of Pakistan lost most of the territory of East Pakistan. At that time the government was running on the decree of Sheikh Mujeeb of Awami League. There were reports of "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 listed such incidents, of which the worst loss of life had occurred in Khulna and Chittagong in the first week of March.<sup>19</sup>

It is reported by International Commission of Jurists that, there is evidence that attacks were launched on non-Bengalis in Rangpur during March 13<sup>th</sup>, and at Saidpur on March 24, during which shops and properties were burnt and a number of people were killed.<sup>20</sup>

### **Killing of Biharis in Khulna March 1972**

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Kasturi Ranjan a *New York Times* correspondent reported that with the surrender of West Pakistani forces, Bengali nationalists equipped with guns and knives, roved around the streets in this eastern town of Khulna. There they hounded out members of the Bihari minority who collaborated with the Pakistan army over the last nine months of the East Pakistan crisis.<sup>21</sup>

She further quoted an Indian military source to be reporting that following a public rally in the city of Khulna, which chanted slogans of "Victory for Bengal!" and "Death to the traitors!" a massacre of Biharis was carried out. In this massacre, a



few Bengalis and more than a hundred Biharis were stabbed or shot to death. It is said that during that public gathering of Bengali nationals which was attended by more than 30,000 people “the mutilated bodies of a dozen Bengali men and women who were said to have been killed by Biharis in the last days of the war between India and Pakistan were exhibited.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Bengali nationalists were intensely angry at Biharis.

Ranjan had been an eye witness to the brutality. She said that she saw with her own eyes, “the bodies of two thick-mustached Biharis in trenches, their throats slit.”<sup>23</sup> In East Pakistan, the Bihari population is estimated at 200,000. Fifty thousand were concentrated in the Khulna District, which borders India.<sup>24</sup>

There was too much anger against the armed forces of Pakistan of non-Bengali origin that even their facilitators and helpers were brutally treated. At Phultala, a place in the city of Khulna, a dozen Biharis aged 12 to 55, were imprisoned. They were “slumped against the wall” where they looked “emaciated and frightened, they had not been given any food since they were captured.”<sup>25</sup> At that time, the Bengali guerrilla fighters were merciless for Biharis, who were considered as traitors. According to a report during the imprisonment of Biharis, they reiterated to a journalist that “each one of these dogs are responsible for dozens of deaths. They led the Pakistanis to rape our women, loot our homes. All these dogs deserve to be hanged.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Stateless Biharis**

After the conflict was over, Biharis were not owned by anyone. They had no place in independent Bangladesh. They were being targeted by Bengali nationals as well as the guerrillas of Mukti Bahini. Pakistan was not in a position to help them, as

they were citizens of Bangladesh. Professor Dr. Moonis Ahmer, while deliberating on the plight of stranded Pakistanis which also include Biharis, said that “there were 66 camps in Bangladesh where thousands of ‘forgotten’ Pakistanis were living in a poor condition for the past 52 years as Pakistan had failed to repatriate them. He said efforts had been made to bring them back but those efforts were not successful. In 1988, the government of Pakistan took an important step and established a fund for the repatriation and rehabilitation of the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh with the help of The Muslim World League, an international Islamic NGO. However, that process was stopped and the fund of millions of rupees — now in the Habib Bank Limited and has multiplied over the years into billions of rupees — was frozen by the United States over allegations that it would allegedly be used in terror financing.”<sup>27</sup> He further added that “the people stranded there also complained that Pakistan accepted millions of Afghan as well as Bengali refugees, but they, the loyal Pakistanis, remained forgotten.”<sup>28</sup>

After the 1971 war, some Biharis managed to escape to West Pakistan through Nepal and Myanmar, but majority ended up in “relief camps.” Tragically, Bengalis viewed the Biharis as enemies, while West Pakistan refused to accept them as citizens. These refugee camps of the Biharis have now deteriorated into slums. Because of efforts by various international social organizations and human rights activists, an agreement in 1974 resulted in Pakistan accepting only 170,000 Bihari refugees. Since then, the repatriation process has stalled. Today, over 300,000 Biharis remain stranded in Bangladesh, enduring hardship and waiting to go to the country for which they have suffered immense loss and continued displacement.<sup>29</sup>

## **Violence against Pakistani forces and Hindus**

Ethnic violence in East Pakistan was not limited to Bengalis vs Biharis, it also included the Pakistani forces of non-Bengali origin. The pattern of violence during the conflict varied depending on the location. Major General H. A. Qureishi writes in his memoir that "the murder of army personnel, caught in ones and twos, became an everyday occurrence. 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."<sup>30</sup>

"With regard to the mutiny at the EPR cantonment at Mymensingh on March 27," local Bengalis told that despite a fierce gunfight a number of West Pakistani officers were killed by a charged mob.<sup>31</sup> It was also reported that the Hindu villagers of Khulna who were fleeing to India via Chuknagar said that they were doing so to escape harassment by local Bengali Muslims, not the West Pakistani military. Local Bengali Muslims gained the most materially by the distress sales of the Hindu refugees, as also from the looting from the dead at Chuknagar.<sup>32</sup>

## **Conclusion**

With the above discussion, it may be concluded that conflict in East Pakistan is multi-faceted. It involved diverse forms of violence ranging from military against the civilian, Bengalis against non-Bengalis, Bengalis against West Pakistanis to Mukti Bahini against pro Pakistanis, especially Biharis. The Bihari community which migrated to East Bengal to escape the atrocities of Hindus after partition were targeted by Bengalis

owing to their different ethnicity. East Pakistan tragedy also questioned the two nation theory, when Muslims attacked Muslims. According to several reports the Biharis were massacred by Bengalis. The revenge from Biharis was taken for being in favour of united Pakistan. They were despised not only for being pro Pakistanis but also for being more enlightened and progressive. The rebel force of Mukti Bahini which was supported by India targeted these pro Pakistani sections of society in a furious manner. It became difficult for Biharis to survive the onslaught of Bengalis on them. Therefore, they migrated to West Pakistan via Myanmar and Nepal. Some who were unable to escape are still living in deplorable condition in refugee camps at the outskirts of Bangladesh, and are called 'stranded Pakistanis'.

The East Pakistan tragedy is a human tragedy. All sections of society suffered the wrath of circumstances during this lawless situation. Therefore, it may be said that almost all parties of the conflict committed crimes in the turbulent years of 1971-1972, when government of Pakistan failed to exercise its writ. Therefore, this tragedy requires prudence and reconciliation. It will be appreciated in international community as well, if both Pakistan and Bangladesh adopt a path of mutual benefit and progress and unleash avenues of peaceful coexistence. The future must not be determined by the scars of the past.

### **Recommendations**

- According to a report by *Express Tribune* on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2021, there are several Biharis in Pakistan. Few amongst them "include 21 in Peshawar; 250 in Lahore; 660 in Karachi and Hyderabad and 63 in Rawalpindi, have so far been awarded in various ceremonies."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, a

concerted study can be conducted on the basis of the accounts given by these Biharis. Their stories may be presented in form of a book. Their epistemological input will be valuable in proving that Bengalis are not the only victims of the East Pakistan conflict. However, it may be done for academic research only.

- Pakistan should not indulge in blame game. Any atrocity against anyone, is condemnable. The topic may be treated as a bad chapter of history pertaining to dictatorial regimes in Pakistan.
- Peaceful co-existence may be projected by accepting the mistakes of the past and proposing a better future for all communities.
- For improving regional connectivity in the region, workable relations with Bangladesh needs to be established.
- Pakistan cannot afford another enemy in the region, therefore any propaganda on portraying Bengalis as aggressors against non-Bengalis might not be of help. As the literature produced on the subject, also talks about atrocities committed by the armed forces of Pakistan.
- Instead, Pakistan may raise concerns about the plight of Bengalis in India. Muslim Bengalis are considered "Bangladeshis" and are subjected to hate crime. They are also at the core of India's controversial National Register of Citizen's process.

## Notes and References

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