

Genocide in the Liberation War of Bangladesh and its Characteristics: A Case Study on Gopalpur Genocide

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Abstract

Bangladesh was born as an independent state in 1971 following a bloody national Liberation War against Pakistan. Millions of people sacrificed their lives and many more were injured and uprooted from their houses. There are many characteristics of the Liberation war of Bangladesh, genocide being one of them. It is one of the most brutal, well-planned and widespread genocides of the 20th century since World War II. Only in a period of nine months, Pakistani army along with their local collaborators killed 3 million people. Pakistani army established its control over the entire country and continued massacre. To be sure, an atrocious genocide took place in Bangladesh. This research paper will focus upon Gopalpur genocide in the Noakhali District of Bangladesh to examine the nature and characteristics of Bangladesh genocide in 1971. On 19 August 1971, Pakistani army killed many people in Gopalpur. Besides killing, Pakistani army raped many women, set fire on many houses and looted many valuable things on that very day. Local collaborators assisted Pakistani army in accomplishing these atrocious activities. The aim of this study is to find out how and why the genocide took place in Gopalpur. This study will enrich the Liberation War Studies of Bangladesh.

Key Words: Genocide, Gopalpur, Bangladesh, Liberation War, Freedom Fighters

Introduction

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country through a bloody national Liberation War in 1971. The independence of Bangladesh involved the killing about 3 million people, raping 2,00,000 women and displacing 10 million people who took shelter in India as refugees in 1971 (Bose, 2007). Many more millions were internally displaced during this period. The first ever national parliamentary election in Pakistan was held in December 1970. With the Six-Point demand as its manifesto, the Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats in the East and became the majority party in Pakistan in the General Election held in 1970 (Bhattacharjee, 1972). However, President Yahya Khan, instead of handing over power to the victorious Awami League, “postponed the convening of the National Assembly, *sine die*” (Kuper, 1981, p 78). But Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the undisputed leader of the Bengalis, addressed his people in his historic speech at the Race Course Ground (later renamed as Suhrawardy Uddayan) in Dhaka during the Non-Cooperation Movement and declared:

‘This struggle is our struggle for freedom; this struggle is the struggle for independence.’
(Rashid, 2001, p.298)

This speech of Bangabandhu was an indirect declaration of independence of Bangladesh. On the night of 25 March 1971, the Pakistani Army launched the Operation Searchlight. They attacked the unarmed Bengalis and systematic genocide started. Over 15,000 people were killed 'between March 25 and 26' in the city of Dhaka alone (Chaudhury, 1972, p 21). Their first target was the teachers and students of Dhaka University, Rajarbagh Police Lines and Pilkhana. Then, they attacked the slums, markets and Hindu populated areas in Dhaka. The Pakistani Army followed similar methods across the country. They continued genocide for nine months until the country was freed from their clutches (Muhith, 1992). It has been explained,

'The principal motive of the West Pakistani leadership was to suppress the Bengalis in such a way that they could continue their domination for a prolonged period of time. The West Pakistani leadership wanted to teach the Bengalis a lesson, so that they could not rise again to demand democracy and autonomy' (Tripathy, 1972, p. 31–32).

In response to the crackdown, Bangabandhu declared the independence of Bangladesh on March 26, 1971 (Rashid, 2001). Despite these atrocities, people from all walks of life responded through armed resistance. *'The Awami League politicians, Bengali civil administration, police, army, students and intellectuals constituted the leadership of the resistance' (Jahan, 1995, p 378).* The liberation War culminated in the final victory on 16th December 1971, resulting in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh. The main characteristic of the Liberation War is genocide-torture. Being a supporter of religion, caste and liberation war, the killing of more than one person has been identified as genocide. Physical torture, rape and forced deportation are also part of it. Pakistani army committed most brutal genocide of the world in a planned way during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Their local collaborators were the Rajakars, Al Badar, Al-Shams and Peace Committees. They lent their hands to Pakistani army in their act of molestation, execution, setting fire, looting etc. With the help of these collaborators, Pakistani army went to the remote villages of Bangladesh and committed brutal genocide. One such a remote village is Gopalpur, Noakhali. Pakistani army went to this village and committed genocide. The atrocious killing at Gopalpur is an important episode in the history of the genocide of Bangladesh. This part of history certainly requires documentation. The aim of this article is documentation.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative methodology while it uses both primary and secondary sources of data collection. Primary data were collected and analyzed from in-depth semi-structured interviews from eye witnesses (mostly sufferer, members of martyr family, freedom fighters). Different types of documents, reminiscences, momentous reports, pictures, news and views etc. relating directly to the topic are also treated as primary sources of data. Published books, journals, research works, reports, features, editorials etc. from newspaper and periodicals, website pages subject to availability and authenticity are the source of secondary data. Data analysis process is descriptive and qualitative in nature. Most of the sources of data are selected data culled from questionnaires and interviews. However, all kinds of information are considered and examined analytically and cross-checked critically.

The Genocide in Bangladesh

Scholars consider the twentieth century as "an age of genocide" (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, p 22). The definition of genocide given by the United Nations in 1949 runs as follows: ... genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

a. Killing members of the group; **b.** Causing serious bodily or mental harm to the members of the group; **c.** Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; **d.** Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; **e.** Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (Center for the Study of Human Rights, 1994, p 36)

In 1996 Gregory Stanton, the president of Genocide Watch, presented a briefing paper called "The 8 Stages of Genocide" at the United States Department of State. In it he suggested that genocide develops in eight stages that are "predictable but not inexorable" (Stanton, G. 1996). In April 2012, it was reported that Stanton would soon be officially adding two new stages, Discrimination and Persecution, to his original theory, which would make for a 10-stage theory of genocide (Gen Prev in the News, 19 April 2012).

Stage	Characteristics
1. Classification	People are divided into 'us and them'
2. Symbolization	"When combined with hatred, symbols may be forced upon unwilling members of pariah groups..."
3. Discrimination	The group identified as other is deliberately discriminated through a series of policies.
4. Dehumanization	"One group denies the humanity of the other group. Members of it are equated with animals, vermin, insects, or diseases."
5. Organization	"Genocide is always organized... Special army units or militias are often trained and armed..."
6. Polarization	"Hate groups broadcast polarizing propaganda..."
7. Preparation	"Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity..."
8. Persecution	"Concentration of the victims into ghettos, trial massacres, expropriation of their property, forced displacement etc."
9. Extermination	"It is 'extermination' to the killers because they do not believe their victims to be fully human".
10. Denial	"The perpetrators... deny that they committed any crimes..."

According to definition or characteristics of genocide, the massacre that was carried out by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh was genocide. Pakistan did not give Bengalis their fair rights in the state. Despite the Bengalis being a majority, West Pakistanis always exploited East Pakistan/Bengalis in every possible way. West Pakistanis always thought of the Bengalis as a subordinate nation. Pakistanis followed the repressive policy in social, economic, political, and cultural and in all other respects. The Bengalis led a democratic movement to assert their rights but the Pakistani government did not listen to it. Even after the Bengalis had won the election of 1970, the rulers of Pakistan were reluctant to hand over power to the elected representatives of the Bengalis. At one stage, they fabricated various pretexts to keep a tight grip on the state power and at the last stage launched attacks on the innocent people of this country. From March 25, 1971, Pakistani army took control of Dhaka and quickly spread to different parts of Bangladesh. They spread to wipe out the Bengali nation through destruction, killing, torture, persecution and oppression. Scholars and historians identified the violence of Pakistani army as inhuman, which results in an enormous loss of the people of East Bengal (Saikia, 2007; Ranjan, 2016; Mookherjee, 2006).

The principal characteristics of the genocide in Bangladesh, as described by the International Commission of Jurists, are as follows:

[T]he indiscriminate killing of civilians, including women and children and the poorest and

weakest members of the community; the attempt to exterminate or drive out of the country a large part of the Hindu population; the arrest, torture and killing of Awami League activists, students, professionals and businessmen and other potential leaders among the Bengalis; the raping of women; the destruction of villages and towns; and the looting of property. All this was done on a scale which is difficult to comprehend (quoted by Kuper, 1981, pp 78–79).

Although the army of West Pakistan killed and burned indiscriminately in order to terrorize all the people, they had some specific targets (Jahan, 1995; Mascarenhas, 1971). According to Mascarenhas, the following were the main targets: (1) The Bengali military men who were in *'the East Bengal Regiment, the East Pakistan Rifles, police and paramilitary Ansars and Mujahids.'* The obvious reason for them to be targeted is that they were the only available trained groups that could resist the army of West Pakistan (Mascarenhas, 1971, p 117). (2) The Hindus (because they were considered by the West Pakistanis as the saboteurs of Islam and agents of India) (3) *'The Awami Leaguers—all office bearers and volunteers down to the lowest rank in the chain of command'* (Mascarenhas, 1971, p 117). This was the party which, after winning overwhelmingly in the 1970 elections, duly demanded transfer of power, which would have ended West Pakistani domination. Therefore, people belonging to this party were to be crushed. (4) Students of colleges and universities who played a significant role in anti-government movements and (5) Bengali intellectuals who were supposed to have guided the independence movement. In the killing of intellectuals, vigilante and regular groups— Al-Badar and Al-Shams—who were Bengali collaborators recruited by the Pakistani Army— played an important role. Most of those collaborators belonged to the political parties—Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim League (Jahan, 1995). They were convinced by the West Pakistanis that as pure Muslims, they had a duty to destroy those who were enemies of Islam and save the integrity of the largest Muslim country Pakistan in the world. As a result, more than 3 million people were killed only in a short period of nine months during the Bangladesh Liberation War. During World War II, the Germans did not kill so many people in such a short time. Between 200,000 to 400,000 women and girls were reported to be physically and sexually tortured by the Pakistani army and their collaborators during the Liberation War (Mookherjee, 2012). In addition, around ten million people took shelter in India as refugees, facing extreme hardships (Kuper, 1981).

Gopalpur Genocide

During the Liberation War of 1971, many brutal genocide took place in Noakhali. Gopalpur in Begumganj upazila is one of those. Begumganj is located at the center of greater Noakhali district. Gopalpur is a famous village in Begumganj upazila. Its area is 4137 acres. The village is about 8 km. north-west of Begumganj police station. Being located at the center point of Begumganj upazila, Gopalpur bazar which is called a local market in Bangladesh was slightly better in 1971. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people of the village. Most of the houses were made of timber and straw. However, some houses were made of corrugated tin. Most people of the village were Muslim and people of other religions were also there as well (Interview with Dinesh Chandra Sarker, Age: 72, a witness of genocide on that day).

The Awami League candidates won in Noakhali at the national parliamentary election in Pakistan held in December 1970. People of Begumganj burst into protest against the Yahia government because they did not transfer power despite the Awami League gaining majority in the elections. In sync with the Non-Cooperation Movement against the West Pakistan government in Dhaka, the Non-Cooperation Movement of Noakhali also started. As in the

whole Country, the Non-Cooperation Movement in Noakhali was led by Awami League. In fact Begumganj became an important center of the national Non-Cooperation Movement. On March 3, a 9 member All Party Resistance Council was formed in Noakhali town hall. The one-week program which was held from March 8 was observed by people from all walks of life of Noakhali district including Begumganj. After the declaration of Independence by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 26 March, the control room of the resistance war was opened at the public Library of Town hall in Noakhali. There a training center was formed with retired Bengali Soldiers of the army, Police, EPR and Ansars. For this reason, Pakistani army targeted to capture Noakhali very quickly. The distance between Comilla cantonment and Noakhali headquarters is about 100 km. To enter Noakhali, it took 10 days for Pakistani army to cross this 100 km. road. Pakistani army had to enter Noakhali via Begumganj from Comilla cantonment. They failed several times to enter Noakhali due to fierce resistance of freedom fighters in Begumganj. The Freedom fighters fought against the Pakistani army in Mainamati, Bagmara, Laksam, Daulatganj, Natherpetua, Bipularsar, Saheb Bazar, Bogadia and Bajra. Hundreds of Pakistani soldiers were killed in these wars (Islam, 2014)

In Gopalpur, there was a camp of freedom fighters. Gopalpur bazar was one of the recruiting and training centers of the freedom fighters in Noakhali. Under the leadership of Subedar Lutfor Rahmar, freedom fighters were trained there. These freedom fighters built resistance to prevent Pakistani army from entering Noakhali. They fought in several fronts. But on 23 April, the freedom fighters were forced to retreat due to the heavy weapons of the Pakistani army who entered Noakhali and set up their main bases at the Technical High School in Begumganj. Pakistani army came to Begumganj and set up their camps because from Laksam to Chaumuhani there are direct rail and land links. Begumganj was also well known as a business center. Begumganj was the main target of Pakistani army due to its geographical location. In Noakhali, most of the war took place at Begumganj upazila (Interview with Lakiot Ullah, a freedom fighter of Gopalpur).

After establishing camp in this area, the Pakistani army formed Peace Committees. Sirajul Islam (TK) was the president of Begumganj branch Peace Committee who was the main culprit behind the genocide of Gopalpur. Torikullah, a Professor of Chaumuhani college, was the secretary. Several persons including Mofizur Rahman, Shafiullah, Abdul Baten, Abdul Motin, Abu Bakar Siddik were also members of the Peace Committee. From these Rajakars and the members of Peace Committee, Pakistani army came to know about the strong position of freedom fighters in Gopalpur. Mofizur Rahman, member of Peace Committee in Gopalpur, used to provide all information to the Pakistani army (Interview with Lakiot Ullah, a freedom fighter of Gopalpur).

As they encountered resistance of the freedom fighters at various places on their way to Noakhali, their main objective was to punish the freedom fighters and their allies. For this purpose, with local people who were against the spirit of the Liberation war, they formed Rajakar forces (collaborators of Pakistani army). Through these rajakars Pakistani army used to collect information about the position and activities of the freedom fighters. From these rajakars Pakistani army got information that Gopalpur village was a strong base for the freedom fighters. On August 10, more than 100 Pakistani troops marched towards Gopalpur to attack the stronghold of the freedom fighters. A group of freedom fighters led by Habildar Siraj resisted Pakistani army at a place named Tita Hazra. Two Pakistani soldiers were killed and several wounded (Interview with Lakiot Ullah, a freedom fighter of Gopalpur). Pakistani army became desperate to avenge this disaster by attacking Gopalpur. On August 19, at

around 10 am about 150 Pakistani troops attacked Gopalpur with heavy weapons. Due to the rainy season the road to Gopalpur was unsuitable to drive. So from the Bangla bazar (local place), the Pakistani forces marched towards Gopalpur. They were divided into two groups and surrounded Gopalpur bazar from both sides. They searched the market shops to find freedom fighters. They captured about a hundred people and laid them on the canal side which is situated beside the market. While searching the shops, they found the flag of independent Bangladesh in a tailor's shop. Pakistani army burst into anger. They searched a number of houses, beat the people, set fire to the house and raped many women. Then they released some of those detained on the canal side because they were not able to participate in the Liberation War. All the others were lined up and brush fired. The canal water became red in the blood of the martyrs. Even after the brushfire, those who survived miraculously were brutally killed by bayonet charges. On that day more than half a hundred innocent people were killed by Pakistani army (Interview with Abu Sayed, Age: 70, witness of genocide on that day).

In the genocide of that day Abdul Latif survived miraculously. He recalled the massacre by narrating, *"I went to sell flour in the market. While Pakistani army was detaining everyone, I with my younger brother was also caught. Those who were detained were picked. Pakistani army released my younger brother and some others. All the rest are taken to the canal side. When I was captured and pushed hard to the canal, I fell instead of standing. That's why I survived that day.* (Interview with Abdul Latif, Age: 70, Victim)

Saber Ali, a victim of torture by the Pakistani army on that day described- *In the morning of 19th August, Pakistani army surrounded the entire market in two directions. Some people were able to escape from the market, some were hiding in the deep water of the canal beside the market. The rest were captured by Pakistani army and kept in the market. They set fire to many houses. They entered many houses and tortured women. Then those people who were caught were lined up on the canal side and made a brushfire. I fell in front of the Pakistani army. They hit me with their guns. My left arm was cut off and blood drained out. After hitting me, I ran and went down into the water. When the Pakistani army left the village, I rose above the water.* (Interview with Saber Ali, Age: 64, Victim)

Findings of Gopalpur Genocide

Pakistani army indiscriminately brushfired and committed a genocide at Gopalpur on 19 August 1971. The following characteristics of this genocide are noticed:

1. The main enemy of the Pakistani army was freedom fighters and supporters of the Awami League. There were camps of freedom fighters in Gopalpur bazar. It was the recruiting and training centers of freedom fighters. Gopalpur was the center point and freedom fighters were active in this village. For this reason, Pakistani army attacked Gopalpur and committed genocide.
2. Apart from a few rajakar, everyone else in the village was in favor of the war of liberation. The people of the village had already speculated about the attack by Pakistani army and they were always in a panic. They were also determined to protect the freedom fighters from the Pakistani army. They assisted the freedom fighters in various ways. For this reason, Pakistani army targeted Gopalpur village.
3. Gopalpur genocide was a pre-planned genocide. Pakistani army had planned several times to attack Gopalpur and failed due to resistance of the local freedom fighters. So they prepared for revenge, attacked Gopalpur on 19th August with heavy weapons and committed genocide.
4. About half a hundred people were martyred in the Gopalpur genocide but only 24 people have been identified. They are Mahbubul Haider Chowdhury (Nosa Mia),

Mohammad Ullah, Md. Abu Bakar Siddque, Md. Momin Ullah, Md. Abul kasem, Md. Ismail Mia, Md. Habib Ullah, Md. Din Islam, Md. Shamsul Haque, Md. Mujib Ullah, Md. Bashir Ullah, Md. Haris Mia, Md. Nur Mohammad, Md. Abdul Mannan, Ohid Ullah, Md. Dulal Mia, Md. Siddiq Ullah, Md. Montaj Mia, Md. Abdul Karim, Md. Sujaut Ullah, Md. Abdur Rashid, Md. Abdus Sattar, Mohammad Ullah, Md. Mobarak Ullah. After so many years of Independence, people of that time are burdened with age. Much information has been erased from the memory of eyewitness. So the identity of all could not be fully ascertained.

5. On that day, Pakistani army raped women in addition to killing people. Several eye witnesses and local freedom fighters confirmed that. However, they didn't disclose their names with a view to protecting their social status.
6. Alone with murder and rape, Pakistani army and their local collaborators set fire and plundered. They searched houses and shops and took away valuable things.
7. Gopalpur genocide was carried out by Pakistani army with the help of their local collaborators (rajakars). They collected information about freedom fighters position in Gopalpur village through them. When Pakistani army attacked Gopalpur Bazar on August 19, local rajakars were with them and they gave directions to Gopalpur and helped them to formulate a plan to attack the bazar, set fire to houses, and looted the houses of the freedom fighters.
8. All martyrs of Gopalpur genocide are ordinary people- some were farmers, tailors or small businessmen. Most of the martyrs were the only bread earners of their families. Many families became overwhelmed with the loss of a sole bread earner. This has a lasting impact on society. Still many families are carrying the burden and the memory of the pain inflicted upon them by the Pakistani army on August 19, 1971.
9. Pakistani army found flags of Independent Bangladesh while they searching shops of Gopalpur bazar. In the early period of the Liberation War, flags of independent Bangladesh were found in a remote village like Gopalpur. This is a very important event in the history of the Liberation War.
10. To preserve the memory of gopalpur genocide, 'Shaheed Smriti Sangsad' was formed. August 19 began to be observed as a special day with the initiative of an organization from 1986. On August 19, 2014 Mass Martyrs' Memorial was built. Locals and families of martyrs pay tribute to the martyrs through various ceremonies on this very day every year.

Conclusion

The Liberation War of 1971 was not a sudden movement or isolated incident. It has a consistent history lasting more than two decades. The Liberation War of 1971 happened as a mark of protest against long oppression, exploitation and deprivation of the Bengalis. Bangladesh achieved independence through an armed struggle. To stop the Bengali's resistance, Pakistani army committed genocide throughout the country. Killing a group of people belonging to a religion, nationality or ethnicity has been identified as genocide in the twentieth century. The villagers of Gopalpur were killed indiscriminately as they were merely the supporters of the Liberation War. The violence that the Pakistani army committed in Gopalpur on August 19, 1971, must be called genocide because the people whom the Pakistani army killed belonged to a particular group, i. e., Bengalis seeking independence from Pakistan. There were camps of freedom fighters in that village and villagers co-operated with them in various of ways. They were supporters of the Liberation War and many of them were found with flags of independent Bangladesh. These were the "crimes" of these innocent people. Not only killing, Pakistani forces raped, committed arson and plundered in Gopalpur

on that day. Local collaborators also took part in these misdeeds of Pakistani army. Like Gopalpur, there have been numerous genocidal places including mass graves in remote areas of Bangladesh. Many of these are unknown to the young generation who are the assets of Bangladesh. The true spirit of the Liberation War of 1971 will be passed to the next generation through this new generation. Highlighting the history of genocide and torture is one of the ways to inform the young generation of the true history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Though the 20th century has aptly been called as a century of genocides, the Bangladesh genocide remains unknown to the wider world. And this is the task as well as the challenge of the historians to present the Bangladesh genocide not only to its young generation but also to the international community as a whole.

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