

THE MYTH OF

**BENGALI**

**GENOCIDE**  
**GENOCIDE**

**DEBUNKED**



CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. As a result of the partition of British India in 1947, Pakistan and India became two sovereign countries. The newly emerged nation states, India and Pakistan, served as a refuge for their respective religious majority, the Hindus and Muslims. The Muslim majority state of nascent Pakistan was detached geographically – East and West Pakistan – by more than 2,204 km of hostile Indian territory. Therefore, when political dissent surfaced in East Pakistan, India started swift manoeuvring on both political and military fronts. Amid fog of military crisis in East Pakistan, Pakistan launched “Operation Searchlight,” to secure the lives and assets of citizens of East Pakistan while establishing the state’s writ to pacify ongoing India-backed rebellion. This operation became the foundation of Indian propaganda against Pakistan.

2. The Operation Searchlight that allegedly went on from 26 March to 25 April 1971 — during which India claimed that three million Bengalis were killed, appeared bizarre from the outset. The hardcore Bangladeshi Nationalists, steered by the Awami League, the dominant political party in East Pakistan, with the help of Indian media, have developed and disseminated disinformation about the events in East Pakistan in 1971. India has aggressively propagated the so-called genocide of 1971 in Bangladesh as one of the deadliest genocides in recent times. To instigate hatred against Pakistan, the claims of the Bengali genocide and the three million dead were regularly repeated in South Asian academic discourses. However, later investigation has revealed that the number of casualties has been grossly exaggerated. It is high time that one must separate facts from fiction and present real-time picture of the tragedy of 1971. It is also important to shun the Indian-sponsored propaganda on so called “Bengali

Genocide”. History cannot be erased, but it can always be evaluated and placed in its correct perspective.

### **Debunking the Myths of 1971 Bangladesh Debacle**

3. Pakistan has never been interested in “reclaiming” East Pakistan, but the truth of 1971 must be told. Through a systematic malicious campaign Pakistanis in particular, and the world in general, have been led to believe a version of history that holds Pakistan responsible for everything that happened in East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh). Actual evidence and sequence of events, however, tell us quite a different story, one which morally bankrupt pseudo- historians, would rather ignore. The fact is that non-Bengali minorities were brutally murdered by “Bengali fascists”.

4. What exactly was the intention of targeting them was not clear, but one can reasonably argue that the resulting chaos facilitated disintegration of Pakistan. If nothing else, a case of “ethnic cleansing” can surely be made against Bengali fascists. And this is something the Government of Bangladesh (the Awami League in particular) would rather hide than accept, and to this day, the crimes committed against minority communities by Bengali nationalists are either ridiculed or simply dismissed by the Awami League. It is particularly this reason why Bangladesh never made any efforts to involve the international community in going after and charging the government of Pakistan for 1971 War crimes. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of Awami League, knew very well that if an impartial, independent, international tribunal were to be set up, like the Nuremberg Tribunal, the truth of their own war crimes against non-Bengalis would be exposed to the world (Kamran, 2020).

### **The Three Million Myth**

5. Surprisingly few researchers and historians have given

Bangladesh conflict a complete and unbiased examination. Therefore, investigation on two aspects – three million killings and ethnic cleansing by Mukti Bahini – could help debunk the myths about 1971.

6. Allegations regarding genocide of almost three million in 1971 crisis is a fabricated and planned narrative against Pakistan. This assertion was first tossed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 8 Jan 1972 even though this assertion is not supported by any official record. Mujeeb stated this figure upon his arrival in Bangladesh from Pakistan on 11 January 1972. Herein lies an irony. For a moment, if we consider that genocide figures is accurate then a rough calculation depicts that during the whole conflict which lasted for 257 days – 25 Mar 1971 to 16 Dec 1971 – the average casualty rate comes to 11,000 per day. These numbers are extremely dubious as no impartial source ever confirmed killings at this mass scale (Shaukat, 2016).

7. A biased approach was adopted to count the number of casualties without making a distinction amid the killings of insurgents and innocent Bengalis, who were brutally murdered by Mukti Bahinis and Indian forces. The terminologies like “*ethnic cleansing and genocide by the Pakistan Army*” were coined and amplified by the Indian side. On the other hand ironically, the coup d'etat by the Mukti Bahini and the atrocities committed by Indian forces have been purposely disregarded all along. When the conflict was over, the impartiality and transparency of so-called war crimes trials had been immediately questioned by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Even today, Human Rights Watch and other observers criticize the Awami League's offensive approach towards sympathizers of Pakistan. This offensive approach is devised to appease the Indian government in violation of international laws. The war

crime trials, conducted at India's insistence over the last six years have already fragmented the Bangladeshi society, which is beset by different foreign policy challenges due to its proximity to India (Shaukat, 2016).

8. A Bengali reporter, Serajur Rahman, who was also a broadcaster related to Bangla Service of BBC during 1971, penned a piece in 2011 for 'The Guardian' clarifying how the later three million figure was injected in mainstream media. He writes, *"On 8 January 1972, I was the first Bangladeshi to meet independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after his release from Pakistan. He was brought from Heathrow to Claridge's by the Indian High Commissioner Apa Bhai Panth, and I arrived there almost immediately. Mujib was puzzled to be addressed as your Excellency by Mr Panth. He was surprised, almost shocked, when I explained to him that Bangladesh had been liberated and he was elected president in his absence. Apparently, he arrived in London under the impression that East Pakistanis had been granted the full regional autonomy for which he had been campaigning. During the day I and others gave him the full picture of the war. I explained that no accurate figure of the casualties was available but our estimate, based on information from various sources, was that up to three lakh (300,000) died in the conflict. To my surprise and horror, he told David Frost later that three million of my people were killed by the Pakistanis. Whether he mistranslated lakh as million or his confused state of mind was responsible, I don't know, but many Bangladeshis still believe a figure of three million is unrealistic and incredible"* (Rahman, 2011).

9. However, in the book "Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy" by Sayyid A. Karim, the first foreign secretary of Bangladesh, wrote a different story about the three million claims, *"As for the number of Bengalis killed in the course of the liberation war, the figure of 3 million mentioned by Mujib to*

*David Frost in January 1972 was a gross overstatement. This figure was picked up by him from an article in Pravda, the organ of the communist party of the Soviet Union” (Karim, 2009).*

10. But how Mujib acquired these statistics from a communist oriented newspaper Pravda? The answer may be found in an article headlined “Pak Army killed almost 30 lakh people” published in “The Bangladesh Observer” on 5 Jan 1972 (which was also used as prosecution evidence in the Ghulam Azam case).<sup>1</sup>

11. It states, *“The Communist party newspaper ‘Pravda’ has reported that over 30 lakh persons were killed throughout Bangladesh by the Pakistan occupation forces during the last nine months, reports ENA. Quoting its special correspondent stationed in Dacca the paper said that the Pakistan Military forces immediately before their surrender to Mukti Bahinis and the Allied forces had killed about 800 intellectuals in the capital city of Bangladesh alone” (Jaaved, 2021).*

12. Pravda's source of information for the statistics is unknown; the publication authority only identified its special correspondent as the primary source, who is then quoted by the Bangladesh Observer. It is important to highlight that the former Soviet Union had a significant role in the independence of East Pakistan and the ensuing rioting among Bengalis. Later, in a television interview Yuri Bezmenov, a veteran KGB Psychological Warfare Specialist, described in detail how the USSR supported Mujib through employing Indian resources (Bezmenov, 2012).

13. In 1974, Bangladesh apparently tried to calculate the total number of people who had been killed in 1971. However,

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<sup>1</sup> “Bangladesh: Azam Trial Concerns,” Human Rights Watch, August 16, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/16/bangladesh-azam-trial-concerns>.

upon most of the study being completed, the actual number came to around 250,000 dead and was nowhere close to 3,000,000 (three million) Mujib had claimed in 1972. Upon hearing the number, Mujib had the entire study shut down. Lawrence Lifschultz<sup>2</sup>, a resident correspondent with the “Far Eastern Economic Review” in Bangladesh, wrote about this in detail, *“In the course of my reporting I met a very interesting man who had a very intriguing story to tell about the work he had recently been doing. He was employed by the Home Ministry and was part of a team of researchers conducting a study that was trying to assess the total number of casualties that had occurred during the nine months of 1971 as war raged across the country. The Home Ministry study was trying to assess how many people had died directly from the armed violence of the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators. They were also trying to estimate how many people had died on the road or once they reached refugee camps across the border in India. Many of these deaths were among children and the elderly. The study was conducted by field workers systematically asking families in villages about those who had died from their village during the war and under what circumstances. They were slowly building up a picture across the country. At the time we met, the Home Ministry team had completed their survey in approximately a third of the districts. My Home Ministry source told me that based on their projections the number of deaths from the war was estimated at 250,000 people. As I recall, this did not include the young, the ill and the elderly, who died either in the refugee camps or as they fled the Pakistan Army. A quarter of million people dying from armed violence is by any measure a terrible and tragic number. However, according to my source, the study was abruptly shut down and discontinued. The reason was that the survey was moving toward a statistical conclusion that differed with the prevailing orthodoxy that three million people had died from armed violence and refugee migration”* (Lifschultz, 2014).

14. And the debate continues till today. Khaleda Zia, the leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and former Prime

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Lifschultz, an American national was South Asia Correspondent of the Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong). He has written extensively on Asian and European affairs for The Guardian (London), Le Monde Diplomatique (Paris), Economic & Political Weekly (Mumbai) and The Nation (New York), among numerous journals and newspapers.

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Minister of Bangladesh, has questioned the legitimacy and facts related to claims of three million deaths by articulating that *“there is a debate about how many hundreds of thousands were martyred in the Liberation War. Different books and documents give different accounts”* (Habib, 2015). Whereas, in Volume 30 of the *“Population Studies: A Journal of Demography”*<sup>3</sup> published in 1976, the study *“Demographic crisis: The impact of the Bangladesh civil war (1971)”* estimates around 500,000 deaths during the conflict (Curlin et al., 1976).

15. In the British Medical Journal’s 2008 volume, the study *“Fifty Years of Violent War Deaths from Vietnam to Bosnia: Analysis of Data from the World Health Survey Programme”* states around 269,000 deaths (allowing a possible range of 125,000 to 505,000). According to the report, earlier estimates of deaths during the Bangladesh conflict were almost 58,000. The survey's goal was to produce an accurate assessment of wartime casualties. The research looked at war-related deaths in 13 nations over a 50-year period, encompassing Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Obermeyer et al., 2008).

16. Despite factual evidence available from non-Pakistani sources, some Bangladeshi and many Indians continue to believe in three million killings. M. A. Hasan, convener of the *“War Crimes Fact Finding Committee”* in Bangladesh said, *“The figure of liberation war martyrs is one such issue which no one should question”* (Bergman, 2016). The fact this is coming from somebody who heads a *“Fact Finding Committee”* is quite disturbing. It is evident from this quote that it wasn’t the fact finding but cementing the myth was the primary objective of the committee.

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<sup>3</sup> Population Studies is a triannual peer-reviewed academic journal covering demography. It was established in 1947 and is published by Taylor & Francis on behalf of the Population Investigation Committee.

### The Myth of Bengali Genocide: Debunked

Since regaining power in 2009, the “Awami League” has attempted to legitimize a trend toward a totalitarian one-party government in Bangladesh by exploiting emotions regarding 1971 war. Only the Awami League, according to its interpretation of history, is the liberating political force in Bangladesh, hence opposing parties are labelled as pro-Pakistan, violent, and unpatriotic.

17. Above facts have been taken from various articles and case studies but if a reader wants a further unbiased, scholarly account of the events surrounding 1971, he/ she should read the Ms. Sarmila Bose’s book “Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War”. Ms. Sarmila is an American historian of Indian heritage currently at the University of Oxford’s Centre for International Studies. She is credited for publishing the first scholarly analysis of the 1971 conflict in her ground-breaking book which she came through during her investigation of the 1971 Bangladesh issue and saw an image of the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1971 Jessore Massacre.

18. What brought Bose's attention to 1971 war casualties was a photograph published in two separate books, claiming to pertain to two separate incidents. In a Bangladeshi book, the picture caption read: "April 2, 1971: Genocide by the Pakistan Occupation Force at Jessore." However, when Bose was reading "The East Pakistan Tragedy" written by Rushbrook Williams<sup>4</sup>, she once again saw the same picture! This time it presented somewhat different angle, but the bodies in the picture and the massacre scene of the event were the same, with the picture caption reading, "The bodies of businessmen murdered by rebels in Jessore city" (Bose, 2011).

19. Rushbrook Williams was a fellow at the Oxford School

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<sup>4</sup> Laurence Frederic Rushbrook Williams, CBE, FRSA (1890–1978) was a British historian and civil servant who spent part of his working life in India and had an abiding interest in Eastern culture.

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of All Souls. He had served in academia and with the Indian Government. He also worked with the media channels like BBC and 'The Times'. All his experience indicates to the fact that he would not willfully or intentionally mislabel the scene of a massacre. During this bitter war, so many bodies had remained unclaimed. There was also a set of dead bodies being claimed by both sides of the conflict! But who were those men? And who killed them? So, one thing which was clear, was that the Jessore massacre might be a genocide, but it was for sure that this massacre wasn't committed by Armed Force of Pakistan. The dead bodies were non-Bengalis living in Jessore, who were butchered by Bengali nationalists in broad daylight (Bose, 2006).

20. Interestingly, as was evident from the picture the dead bodies in Jessore were outfitted in shalwar kameez. This indicated that either they were West Pakistanis or Biharis. Ms. Sarmila Bose in her book has done a case-by-case study to count the bodies during the massacre and comes out with an estimate of between 50,000 to 100,000 killing of the people by Bengali nationalists on all sides during the 1971 war. This includes People from the West Pakistan, Biharis and Bengalis.

21. There is another interesting read by Dr Muhammad Abdul Mu'min Chowdhury, who was a Bengali nationalist and had actively participated in the 1971 separatist movement. Mr. Chowdhury in his book "Behind the Myth of Three million", challenged the falsehood and conspiracy theories that emerged during the 1971 crisis. He cited a range of sources, which showed that it was not a genocide although Pakistani Army carried out a limited counterinsurgency operations in East Pakistan. He further revealed that when Bangladesh was created, 2000 Taka was offered by the then de-facto government to every family that suffered losses during the war, however, compensation was only claimed by 3000 families. If there had been three million killing of

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Bengalis, then there would have been more families seeking compensation. Furthermore, only 40,000 Pakistan armed forces person actually participated in the war, which is far lesser than alleged 93,000 troops. When New Delhi occupied Eastern Pakistan, the Pakistani forces at that time were at a disadvantage of 50:1 ratio (Chowdhury, 1996).

#### **Ethnic Cleansing by Mukti Bahini**

22. The murder of Biharis is well known, but what is not known are the massacres committed against Chakma Buddhists in Chittagong Tract Hills and the small Punjabi business community within Dhaka.

23. It is both interesting and unfortunate to know that the foundation of cross-border terrorism in the sub-continent was laid by India. Indian agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) established in 1968, is the pioneer to conduct cross border terrorism operations through Mukti Bahini (Sharaf, 2016).

24. For reference, Mukti Bahini was headed by Mukti Fauj and Sangram Parishad<sup>5</sup> was leading this fauj. Indian military along with RAW operatives and Mukti Bahini guerrillas were running training camps in multiple Indian states that included Bihar, Tripura, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, and Mizoram.

25. During the late 1970's, Mukti Bahini – trained and armed by Indian Army, started subversive terrorist activities by killing non-Bengalis. They also attacked different parts of the state machinery that included power plants, railways, and looting banks etc. In the wake of this unrest, Pakistan Army started 'Operation Searchlight' in March 1971 aimed at restoring law-and-order situation and to safeguard the lives

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<sup>5</sup> Organization founded by Bengali politicians and intellectuals to agitate for the recognition of the Bengali language.

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and properties of East Pakistanis. This operation helped to establish the writ of the state. The total strength of Pakistan Army troops posted in East Pakistan in 1971 before commencement of hostilities was estimated around 12,000. Operation Searchlight helped to counter the subversive activities carried out by Mukti Bahini who were supported by Indian Army and RAW. The operations also helped to throw the Mukti Bahini across the border back into India. Mukti Bahini failed in its “Monsoon Offensive” after Pakistani reinforcements successfully countered Bengali engagements (*Saleem, 2016*).

26. The Eastern Command of Indian Army initiated “Operation Jackpot” in May 1971. This operation was initiated to reorganize and restructure Mukti Bahini who were killing innocent lives before Pakistan Army started operations against them to stop them from further killings. Interestingly, the Bahini group was armed by Indian forces with sophisticated technology like the Italian howitzers, DC-3 aircraft, fighter planes DHC-3 and much more. All this military equipment is now preserved at the Museum in Dhaka – the capital of Bangladesh. Indian army’s Operation Jackpot vigorously started offering training to some 5000 guerrillas every month. The aim was to use these fighters along with Mukti Bahini and Indian army personnel to infiltrate in East Pakistan.

27. Archer Kent Blood, who was an American diplomat and served in Dhaka as the last American Consul General stated, *“Indian soil was made available for training camps, hospitals and supply depots for the Mukti Bahini” and these guerrilla fighters had a “safe haven to which it could retire for rest, food, medical supplies and weapons.”* Indian Army also established a jungle airstrip for guerrilla fighters (Mukti Bahini) from where the Indian Air Force conducted raids by DHC-3 aircraft. It is estimated that more than 400 commandos

affiliated to Mukti Bahini group were trained to drown vessels in Chittagong, Chandpur and Narayanganj ports (Saleem, 2016).

28. Mukti Bahini consisted of the regular and the irregular forces. Major General Oban of the Indian army who was an expert in guerrilla warfare, hired the best fighters of Bahini group named as Mujib Bahini. General Oban provided them political and military training. Mukti Bahini Sector Commander, Lt. Col. Kazi Nuruzzaman, who was the principal commander of Mukti Bahini stated: *“Having received the training, political commandos found it embarrassing to identify themselves as products of the Indian authorities. So, they gave themselves the name of Bangladesh Liberation Force.”* Another source quoted that *“Mukti Bahini killed around 100,000 Biharis (according to the ‘Chronology for Biharis in Bangladesh’) to 150,000 Biharis (according to the ‘Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict; page 64). Qutubuddin Aziz, in ‘Blood and Tears’, has documented 170 eye-witness accounts of the ‘atrocities committed on Biharis and other non-Bengalis’ across 55 towns, covering ‘110 places where the slaughter of the innocents took place”* (Gates & Roy, 2016).

29. According to former South Asia correspondent for the ‘Far Eastern Economic Review’, Lawrence Lifschultz, a Mukti Bahini leader named Abdul Kader Siddiqui, killed many non-Bengalis with his own hands and astonishingly the whole event was recorded by foreign film teams who were invited by Siddiqui to eyewitness the show.

30. Evidently, according to the census of 1951 it was estimated around 671,000 Biharis in Eastern part of Pakistan and 20% of the whole Bihari inhabitants were brutally slaughtered by Bahinis supported by Indian Army. As per

professor of history Yasmin Saikia's<sup>6</sup> "Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh", Bihari women were assaulted and arduously tortured by Bahini's guerrilla fighters (Yasmin, 2011, p. 41).

31. As documented in December 1971, it was estimated that a total of 40000 Pakistan Army persons were posted in Eastern flank (of which 23,000 were infantry). In December 1971, Indian troops strength was around 150,000 in Eastern side. Additionally, 400,000 with 100,000 Indian Army-trained Bahini guerrilla fighters were also present. Indian Air Force organised four "Hunter Squadrons, one Sukhoi Squadron, three Gnat Squadrons and three MiG-21 Squadrons." This comparison clearly indicates that it was impossible for Pakistan Army to commit three million killings while confronting half a million rival forces.

32. One might have forgotten the terrorism spread by Mukti Bahini but the terrorist activities by Bahini group unleashed on innocent people both belonging to Biharis and other non-Bengalis with the support of Indian government and their army cannot be wiped out from the history books.

Above all is the proof that the involvement of Indian government for East Pakistan debacle started much earlier than 1971. Ashok Raina, author, and writer of "Inside RAW: The story of India's secret service" believed that the debacle of East Pakistan schemes started much earlier around 1962-63. The debacle of 1971 started with planned cold-blooded homicides, rape, and tortures with the help of RAW.

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<sup>6</sup> Yasmin Saikia is the Hardt-Nickachos Chair in Peace Studies at the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict and a professor of history in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies at Arizona State University.

**CONCLUSION**

33. The 1971 debacle ended with the separation of East Pakistan from the West Pakistan. The creation of Bangladesh has been portrayed to have been achieved after a genocide in popular accounts and in Bangladeshi nationalist histories. It is narrated as a massacre and genocide committed by Pakistan Army, whereas the reality is not as such. In fact, it was the Mukti Bahini with the support from Indian Army and RAW, who were responsible for most of the killings of Bengalis and the non-Bengalis in the erstwhile East Pakistan.

34. This research examines some of the disinformation associated with the 1971 debacle. It also debunks a number of myths surrounding the events of 1971, which were kept as secret. If the killings by Bahini group are assessed impartially, it will definitely be categorised as 'Genocide' under the Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 UN Charter.

35. The study further validates that it wasn't a real uprising in East Pakistan but an Indian-induced insurgency, which was aimed at breaking up of Pakistan on the basis of ethnicity. India crafted the whole plan and executed it with the support of its military and intelligence agencies.

36. It is also quite evident from this research that Awami League has hidden the facts and not allowed them to be included in the history of Bangladesh. For its part, the Pakistani government has so far remained reticent. Its high time that one must raise the issue at both national and international fora for an open inquiry into those killings. Pakistan owes it to those who gave their lives in 1947 for the creation of the motherland – Pakistan, then for its unity in 1971.

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