



RESEARCH PAPER

1971 War: Myths and Realities

¹Sadoon Masood* ²Dr. Muhammad Imran ³Muhammad Arslan

1. PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, GC Women University Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Visiting Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author** sadoonmasood@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The catastrophic event of 1971 separation of East Pakistan is great riddle for researchers. Large number of books and articles are available on this issue, but the quest of truth is still prevailing in the academic sphere. The estimated numbers of casualties are the main controversial point in the minds of people especially the concerned parties. Bangladesh side claims that there were massive war crimes from the Pakistani army including torture, killing and rapes. Where the Pakistan stance is different due to the responsibility burden, Pakistan consider Bangladesh stance as an exaggeration and denunciation. Indian side also back Bangladesh's propaganda due to its rivalry with Pakistan. Neutral observers provide some use full details on the death toll of 1971 which is more near to the stance of effected party. Some of the writers declare it great deception from Pakistan army which undermines the casualties. Some claim it as ethnic cleansing or genocide. The purpose of this research is to present the true picture of war Realities which would be more balanced and neutral description of 1971. Both primary and secondary data has been taken from government reports, research articles, newspapers etc.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Death Toll, Genocide in East Pakistan, Geographic Disintegration, Incompetence of Political Elite, Nationalistic Mythologies. War Crimes

Introduction

Back in Soon after the partition the sense of alienation started to develop in East Pakistan. The geographic disintegration and lack of road link between East and West fostered the differences of both parts. The religious ties were the only bindings but slow political developments in the country created a vacuum where Western part felt more political inability. Same was the case with economic conditions, the economic capacity and share of Eastern part was greater than Western but the fruits were not shared accordingly due to the western political elites. The population and share of labor also remained a critical economic variables between East and West Pakistan, the non-acceptance of Bengali ethnicity triggered the sense of inferiority in Bengali Nationals. Historians argue that it was a flash back of pre partition when Muslims were ignored by the Hindus and British, same was the treatment with Bengalis from Punjab and other provinces. The lack of opportunities which Muslims faced was the case with Bengalis in political economic and employment prospects. Bengali Nationalist movement started in East-Pakistan and "Operation Search Light" carried out by the West Pakistani army to curb the Bengali Nationalist movement in East-Pakistan in March 1971.

Bangladesh claim that atrocities were from the other side but Pakistan army and Pakistani writers argue that Awami-League started the massacre of non-Bengalis which resulted in outburst of conflict in East Pakistan. In this paper the authors try to explain Pakistani view in start about the casualties through the Hamood ur Rahman commission

Report succeeding by the Bangladesh view and lastly discuss the neutral and Indian Claims on the killings of 1971 war of Bangladesh.

Hamood-ur-Rehman Commission Report

The Hamood-ur-Rehman commission was appointed in December 1971 to investigate the events of war and to inquire the role of army in killings and atrocities, it gave its report in July 1972. It was based on the interviews of 213 witnesses of war which provide clear insight of the 1971. The commission was appointed under the supreme court chief justice Hamood-ur-Rehman, it revisited the reasons of surrender of eastern command in Bangladesh, how Makti Bahine evolved the violence the lack of competence from the men in Khaki in special reference to their moral behavior toward women and innocents. The witnesses which were investigated were from reputable and respectable sections of the society including Z. A. Bhutto, Yahya Khan and 73 high ranked army officials. The report remained unavailable to the general public due to its openness and blatant exposure towards the Pakistan military. The incompetence and corrupt mid set of senior martial law officers who were greedy for wine, women, land and houses. The question of financial fraud and misuse of authority in everyone's personal capacity was also addressed in detail in this report. On the other side the Awami League and Bengalis also went violent after 3rd March announcement of parliamentary session by Yahya Khan. After the 3rd march the Biharis and western Pakistani were under great repression in the name of retaliation against the political alienation of Eastern wing. Most of the killings were aimed to show the resentments against the political and military steps of Z.A. Bhutto and Yahya Khan. (Government of Pakistan, 2000)

Role of Pakistan Army

According to the commission Pakistan army was accused of many allegations which have two major categories. "On 25th and 26th March Pakistan army used huge amount of force and weaponry in the streets of Dacca. Deliberate killings and persecutions including doctors, professors, engineers and intellectuals in the country side. A lot of them were buried in mass graves. The Hindu minority, business men, civilian service man, and industrialists were also the targets of gun barrels. Women were also the soft target for military personals as a source of revenge, torture and sexual abuse. Mujeeb-ur-Rahman claimed that he had proofs that Pakistani army was going to change the green color of East Pakistan into Red" (Hamoodur Rahman, 1972).

Pakistan army was deployed to suppress the political riots on 25, March. The old town of Dhaka was under attack. Civilian population faced the furry of war Pakistan army regathered its auxiliary forces in response to the "Makti Bahini", these attacks were targeted especially towards Bangali fighters but the collateral damage was more on the civilian sides due to the populace terrain of Dhaka. These attacks went on until the surrender of army 16 December (Torture in Bangladesh 1971-2004, august 2004, p. 7). Last week of war was very bloody from 2 to 10 December, army was projected to sweep the Bangali Intelligentsia who provoked the sense of alienation and nationalism in Bangali society. Al-Badar group was accused of major attacks on students, journalists and professors. Pakistan side claims that the only 26000 casualties were reported in 1971 war which looks unrealistic.

Dhakha University was also under the hammer of army personals, the civil society which was the main proponent of independence, originated from academia. The Intellectuals; Bangali and Hindu professors upsurged the voice of discriminatory manners from the west side caused great feeling of resentment in students of Dhaka University. Student's processions and riots were frequent during the 9 months of conflict. There were also some reports that students were indulged in active armed encounters with army alongside Bengali Guerrilla fighters. The result was devastating, army attacked Dhaka University's "Iqbal" and "Jagannath hall", students dormitories were targeted by the soldiers. "Jagannath hall" was particularly for non-Muslim (Hindus) students of university. Iqbal hall

was residence of students who were supporters of East Pakistan Student organization of Awami-league. Male and female students both were killed in campus without any discrimination. Pakistan auxiliary forces started to operate from Dhaka University operation with heavy shelling on 25th March, those who survived in shelling were fired on.

Major General Fazal Muqem , historian of Pakistan army wrote; “some of the rooms were busted by rocket launchers to open their doors” (Ahmed). British council library of campus was used as fire base by army for shelling the dormitories According to the correspondent from British newspaper “telegraph Daily” in this tanks backed shelling around 200 students were executed in Iqbal hall .later it was reported by some student unions that bodies were scattered after two days of massacre outside the lawns of dormitories. Same happened to the students of Jagganath hall, burnt bodies irrespective of their gender ethnicity and religion were all around some were thrown in to nearby lack. Female students were also subjugated to torture and war crimes, In “Rukeya hall” Dhakha university According to the western journalist “Archer Blood” the female hotel building was set on fire and so many of female students were gunned down by forces on 31st March. Some cases of sexual torture after rape were also witnessed, six girls were tortured in a room and hanged by their heels with the ceiling fan after rape (Rummel).

Most of the students fled away after the operation “Search light” to the nearby villages and towns but army searched the remote villages and caught some of them who were interrogated and then killed by slow torture. Suspected students with Makti Bahini links were badly tormented by military.

Awami-league

March 1 to 25 the Dhaka was under the strong grip of Awami-League fighters who tormented the non-Bengalis and Pakistani supporters. They were subjected to loot treason and murder, League fighters murdered about 5000 non Bengalis (Aziz, 1974). The demagogues of Awami-League and it hard core nationalist authorities confronted federation before the beginning of formal conflict of 1971. The terror machine of Awami-League was active against every alleged sentiment of West Pakistan. Hatred for Biharis and government mounted at that time. The Bangali nationalism was centered on “Golden Bangla” rhetoric where other non Bangali fractions were less privileged and considered as outliers. Within the hours of Yahya Khan Speech, the Mujeeb-ur-Rehman announced antigovernment riot through press conference due to the temporary delay of constitutional session of March 3rd. The riots were oriented to paralyze the administration and law enforcement in the Capital. On the other side it was the order for Awami-league armed groups to “go ahead” to storm the Non Nationalist element of the society. The weapons and auxiliary was looted from Rifle Club township of Narayanganj, a vicinity industrial area. New Market and baitul-Mukaram weopen markets were also looted by militants to gather the ammunition. The Dakha university was said to be the logistic base for the fighters of Awami-League where weapons were supplied and students were trained to shoot in part time firing range. “At Chittagong procession of Awami league fighters launched the attack on “Wirelss town” and other colonies; acts of robbery, torture, rape and murder were wide spread. In Ferozshah colony about 700 hundered homes were burned with their inhabitants including children and women.in addition to these the 300 people were killed on 3rd and 4th March in these localities. No one was able to escape but to face the furry of belligerents” (The Events in east Pakistan, 1971, 1972).

Some of the deadliest events of 1971 war are dominated by the perspective of victorious side; Bangali Nationalists, who claim that every atrocity was from the other side and the oppression was projected at freedom fighters. But now there are some different views from western writers like “Sarmila Bose” who argue that both parties are in traps of wartime myths, on the other side it’s also not the case that Pakistan army is not responsible for brutality. Bengalis were considered as overly victimized during the conflict and Pakistani army hasn’t juggernauted as it is depicted in history books.

West Pakistan Element under Oppression

The Biharis who migrated from subcontinent at the time of partition and settled in Bangladesh remained under oppression by the nationalists Bengalis. The ethnic violence caused great number of casualties in every single incident against these migrated societies in 9 month war and afterwards; men, women and minors were brutally massacred during skirmishes in Chittagong, Jossore, Santahar and Khulna. Biharies bodies were reported to be floating on rivers and littering on the land. Pakistan army was oriented to killings of Bangali man where discriminatory hatred lead killings of Biharies fostered inside the Bihari areas during 9 month. "Incidents of 28th March in south west area of Khulna town where large number of Biharis were slaughtered in jute mills" (Bose, April 1, 2011).

"Pakistan army was sometimes powerless and acted only in need of emergency to contain the riots and diaspora in the Dhakha city. Shaikh Mujeeb and his family accepted that army was incapable against the mobs who tormented the order of administration. Claims that army never opened fire on the first place are Wight full rather it reacted in response to the shooters of Bangali guerillas. In March cantonment of Saidpur was attacked, military personals inside were fired on. Chittagong the main water port of East Pakistan, base of East Bangal Regiment was barricaded by planed efforts of Bangali war mongers to stop the supplies to the regiment. Similar barricades were in Dhakha and other logistic grounds of Pakistan army" (WILLIAMS, 1972, p. 66).

Death Toll

For many the staggering statistics of three million casualties are not well authenticated and based on proper survey. There is no official report present which claim that gigantic figure. There are very few sources which are backed by mass graves and field records. The notion of mass graves which were in abundance were not forensically checked and examined through proper interrogation procedure. The death toll which is depicted by neutral sources is more trust worthy. The total number of casualties contain both Bengalis and non-Bangali nationals like Biharis and other West Pakistan supporters, so the three million figure is inflamed information by the Bangladesh authorities. Peace Institute of research of Norway and university of Sweden gathered the information and data on actual number of casualties in wars from 1900 onward on the basis of eye witnesses and Media findings, they claim that the actual number of people killed in 1971 were about 58,000. This figure shows some flaws and some evidence shortcomings; especially it is more centered to non-civilian battle casualties.

The figure of 3 million, mostly people consider this figure came from Shaikh Mujeeb during an interview on 18, January, 1972 to the "David Frost"(western journalist) in which He said; "about 3 million people lost their lives for the freedom of Bangladesh including men, women, children, intellectuals, peasants, workers, and student".

The facts behind this figure may have blurred through some mistake of understanding, Mujeeb was considering three lakh not thirty million. This argument was supported by Serajur Rahman who was the 1st men who met Mujeeb after his release from Pakistani jail. Similarly, first foreign secretary and writer of biography of Mujeeb 'Triumph and Tragedy' in a foot note Sayyid A Karim mentioned that the three million figure was an overstatement from Mujeeb which was taken from same 'Pravda' article. Another Bangladesh Observer published an article on 5, Jan 1972 based on communist paper information and claiming that 800 intellectuals were also persecuted by Pakistan army just before the surrender to Makti Bahini and Indian forces.

According to some more recent researches by Health Metrics and Evolution in the Washington University Publication of 2008 in British journal of Medical, population survey of World Health Organization analyses. The journal claim direct war and violence related deaths were about 269,000 in 1971.

“The most trust worthy study published in 1967 by hospital Cholera (now ICDDR) in a renowned journal ‘Population Studies’ it had the data of deaths and births of that particular area from year 1963 to 1972. According to that death and birth rate population information, the total number of casualties were around five lakh. It was collected through reliable sources and by systematic data collection techniques from the rural population so it was without a doubt a great piece of research. The 500,000 figure also contain those who died due to mal nutrition and lack of food, degenerative situation of war in East Pakistan. The basic data source of this study was the area of Matlab Bazaar Thana (rural population)” (George T. Curlin, Mar., 1976).

Description of different views of casualties

Description in source	Estimate in book/report			Book/article author	Specific source
	Low	Medium	High		
Killed		50,000		Chuaderi (from Time magazine).	Statement by Bhutto in March 1972
Dead	300,000		500,000	Sisson and Rose.	From an Indian official who held a responsible position on the issue of Bangladesh
Killed	500,000			Glasser & Possony	Source not stated
Killed	500,000		3 mil	Pike.	Source not stated
Dead		1000		Echardt	Civilians from famine and massacre
Dead	1.25 mil		3 mil	Harff and Gurr.	Bengali nationalists
Killed	1 mil		3 mil	Chalk & Jonassohn	Source not stated
Dead	1 mil			Chowdhury	Source not stated
Victims		1 mil		Chaudhuri	From the Times, Guardian and Le Monde
Genocide killed			2 mil	Mascheranos	Source not stated
Dead	2 mil		3 mil	Stohl	From Roberta Cohen, John Simpson, Jana Bennett
Killed	2.2 mil		3 mil	Kuper	Source not stated
Killed	3 mil			Chaudhuri	From Pravda's Dhaka correspondent
Killed	3 mil			Chaudhuri	From Shiekh Mujib Interview
Killed		3 mil		Chaudhuri	From Bangladesh govt report
Killed			3 mil	Chaudhuri	From surveys of Bangladesh newspapers
Butchered		3 mil		Roy	Source not stated
Victims		3 mil		Sisson & Rose	India's figures of Pakistani atrocities
Killed		3 mil		Kuper	Source not stated
Slaughtered		3 mil		Muhith	Source not stated
Killed		3 mil		Payne	Source not stated
Killed		8 mil		Chandra	Source not stated

Source: <http://bangladeshwarcrimes.blogspot.com/2011/11/sayedee-indictment-analysis-1971-death.html>

Rape Counts

The women were soft targets for both the sides so plenty of women were raped during the 9 month long war. “It is stated that about 200,000 women were victims of sexual abuse by Pakistan army, the stats came from an Australian doctor who was in East Pakistan in March 1972, for 6 months named, Dr Geoffrey Davis. According to another Australian based scholar Bina D'Costa, who researched on this particular issue, she claims that the figure of 25,000 forced pregnancies is true rather than the gigantic figure of 200,000” (Islam, 2011). The estimate was well reviewed through reported abortions and programs of adoption. Women being sexual hostages in bunkers and houses were also reported.

“International Committee of Red Cross” also refer to 25,000 cases of rape and force marriages during the 1971. Although this total does not contain the women of Bihari society, women who were raped in houses and those migrated to India.

Conclusion

The war of 1971 undoubtedly was a great humanitarian disaster in East Pakistan, people lost their lives during the conflict of political and military elites of both sides. Any innocent who faced the misery and lost his/her life is Wight full, but the exaggerated Claims of three million killings is unrealistic. The figure which is more frequently reported is between three to five lakh and it seems considerable. These numbers also include indirect war theater casualties due to mall nutrition, lack of food, migration and degenerated peace situation of East wing.

People who migrated to India also faced hard and life threatening conditions due to lack of proper hosting facilities in India. About 10 million were reported who migrated to India due to situation of uncertainty in Eastern part. Indian entry into war also caused the death toll increment. Post war situation of Bangladesh was very fragile due to long war and chaotic situation which lead to poor health and economic instability countrywide. The lack of proper infrastructure to run the country was problem for newly empowered government of Awami-League. Poverty was sky high after the war, so it was also a blame show against West Pakistan which caused these circumstances for the people of Bangladesh. Similarly the rape counts were also exaggerated, according to Hamood-ur-Rehman commission Pakistan army was accused of war crimes against women but the figure of 200,000 was not supported through any proper evidential record. The more accurate figure was about 25000 or more war related abuses against women which didn't include cases of Bihari women and other unreported incidents.

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