

The Case of Bangladesh 1971: Blasphemy, Genocide and Violence Against Women

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When Malala Yousafzai and her companions were shot by the Taliban, the whole of Pakistan expressed outrage. The attack on a young girl fighting for her right to education was shocking to many Pakistanis. What was unusual about this event was, unfortunately, not the targeting of girls, but the fact that there was a national outcry.

No such outrage was expressed when Asia Bibi, a poor Christian woman was charged with blasphemy. Asia Bibi is facing the death penalty and there are fears for her safety even if she were acquitted and released, as people charged with blasphemy are often killed or may 'die' in custody. They are not only being persecuted by the State but are at grave risk, even while they are in the custody of the state [1]. No-one has yet been brought to justice for the death of the former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, although she herself, had named suspects in the Taliban and clearly predicted that her death would be the result not only of 'non-state' fundamentalist forces, but of those in the Pakistani establishment who wanted to get rid of her [2].

What is the link between the complete impunity for the deliberate targeting of women at all levels of Pakistani society, and the trials of alleged war criminals going on today in Bangladesh? The link is the forgotten genocide committed in Bangladesh in 1971. Appeals to violence in the name of religion were a central feature of this conflict as was the systematic targeting and mass rape of women. A military strategy to counter an armed uprising involved the mass murder, impregnation and forced pregnancies of unarmed civilians. But intertwined with it, was a fundamentalist strategy which involved not only fighting for Pakistan but turning it into an Islamist state, while attacking religious minorities and all who were not 'good' Muslims. Women, were attacked as professionals, as activists and simply for being women - particularly if they were from religious minorities.

Unlike Bangladesh, which is attempting to make good on an election promise to hold war crimes trials, Pakistan reneged on its promise to try its own military for war crimes, even though a Commission of Inquiry recommended that officers should be tried [3]. Instead of containing them, military and civilian leaders have made deals with fundamentalists, and sometimes with the support or acquiescence of Western powers, enormously increased their power.

In openDemocracy recently, I argued that Bangladesh was the forgotten template for 20th century war. Long before the killings and mass rape that took place in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, Bangladesh showed what happens when militias allied to the army are involved in a conflict [4]. Although contemporary witnesses, including a number of US diplomats [5] were convinced that they were witnessing genocide[6] - that is the deliberate destruction of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group; by the twenty first century, the conflict in Bangladesh had largely disappeared from international concern. A BBC website defining genocide, for instance, failed to include Bangladesh even among a list of possible genocidal campaigns. Since 1972, not a single human rights organisation has done any investigation of the conflict, although they have been harsh in their comments about the establishment of an international crimes tribunal to try alleged war criminals.

The Pakistan military, one of the chief perpetrators of the conflict, is out of reach of the Bangladeshi

authorities. Nine men have been charged and numerous others, including at least two men resident in Western countries, are being investigated. All those charged are Bengalis. They are opposition leaders mostly of the Jamaat e Islami, a transnational fundamentalist political party, allied to the Muslim Brotherhood and often seen by Western governments as 'moderate Islamists'. In Pakistan, in Britain and in the US, those accused of grave crimes enjoy almost complete impunity [6]. It is only in Bangladesh that there is an attempt at holding them accountable. A mass movement, conducted almost entirely by survivors of the genocide, and energised by a new generation of younger activists, made the trial of alleged war criminals a major issue in the last elections.

As Sara Hossain and Bina D'Costa have explained, in their thoughtful discussion of redress for crimes of sexual violence [7], women such as Jahanara Imam [8] were the leading figures in the people's movement for accountability. Jahanara was a 'mother' of the liberation war, like Sufia Kamal [9] whose long career as a writer stretched back to the great Hindu and Muslim writers of Bengali literature - Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and the science fiction writer Roqaiya Sakhawat Hossain. Bengali nationalism grew out of a cultural movement for language and secular identity, in which women were prominent actors.

In March 1971, the military in West Pakistan decided on a military crackdown to avoid accepting the results of the elections which would have made the Bengali leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of both East Pakistan (as Bangladesh was known) and West Pakistan. During the course of the conflict, they were politically and militarily supported by the Jamaat e Islami, whose leader Golam Azam is alleged to have incited violence and whose student wing are alleged to have formed the basis for paramilitary death squads. Both the military and their fundamentalist allies carried out actions which could be construed as genocidal in intent. There was a convergence of aims but they were carried out for somewhat different reasons. The Pakistan army, targeted Hindus and other minorities for killing, with large numbers of women raped and forcibly impregnated. Hindus were seen as outside the nation of Pakistan. They were depicted as part of the enemy nation, India, and therefore a legitimate target. West Pakistani soldiers also displayed racialised attitudes to Bengalis, similar to the intra-Muslim conflict seen more recently in Darfur.

But there is another aspect to the atrocities and that is the attempt to depict Bengali Muslims as not proper Muslims. General Yahya Khan was said to have said of Bengalis, 'Make them Muslims' - when he landed in Dhaka. This is interpreted by some as one of the bases for sexual slavery, mass rape and forcible pregnancy. His project would have been given ideological ballast by fundamentalists who hated the common practices of Bengali Islam because it rejoiced in a traditional syncretic culture, fusing the antinomian traditions of Sufi- Bhakti - the devotional aspects of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist traditions. For fundamentalists, this traditional form of religion, is itself blasphemous and may be tantamount to apostasy. The modern culture of Bengal was also considered un-Islamic.

At a filmed meeting of the Centre for Secular Space [10] in London, Asif Munier, son of the playwright, Munier Chowdhury [11], described his father, who had protested against the banning of Tagore, being picked up by masked men, just two nights before the surrender of the Pakistani army. Knowing they were going to lose the war, Islamist death squads travelled around Dhaka picking up journalists, academics, writers, doctors and others, in an incident known as the 'killing of the intellectuals'. Among those killed was Selina Parvin, a single mother and journalist, whose mutilated body was found in the killing fields of Rayer Bazaar [12]. A survivor of one of the torture centres, described hearing men being tortured for their love of Tagore. Although, US Ambassador Rapp, has argued that only the killings of Hindus might amount to genocide, (as others might fall under the category of political killings), I believe that this view, does not do justice, to the comprehensive assault that was mounted on all Bengalis as a national, ethnic and religious group. It does not take into account the specific ways in which religion was used to shape the targeting of individuals who are born Muslim but refuse to live by fundamentalist tenets.

In the case of Malala in Pakistan, the Taliban justified itself by stating, that it was “not just allowed ... but obligatory in Islam” to kill such a person involved “in leading a campaign against Shariah and (who) tries to involve a whole community in such campaigns, and that personality becomes a symbol of anti-Shariah campaign. [13]”

Note the language of obligation that is used by the Taliban, creating a ‘duty’ to kill. The intellectuals and many thousands of less well known Bengalis were killed simply because by standing for an independent Bangladesh, they were a symbol of an ‘anti-Shariah campaign’. At the time of the conflict, in Bangladesh, it was not simply military orders but fatwas and incitement through the media, which were the means by which killing was justified. Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, a Muslim reformer, who was formerly in the Pakistani student wing of the Jamaat e Islami, told the Centre for Secular Space meeting that he had been trained both to mobilise and disrupt. He agreed that the designation of someone as ‘kuffr’ an infidel or as an apostate, could result in targeting them. Though he has now moved to supporting secular values, he was closely involved in advocating for the fatwa on Rushdie and worked with Choudhury Muenuddin [14], a prominent British Muslim. David Bergman and I investigated him in a film called ‘The War Crimes File’ [15], for his involvement with death squads.

Whether operating through the law – by making blasphemy a crime punishable by death (as has happened in Pakistan) [16] or by extra-judicial executions, and illegal fatwas, the blasphemy threat against writers, artists, avowed apostates and the poor and marginalised alike, is key to understanding grave crimes such as genocide as well as violence against women (particularly activists). A determination of genocide does not rest simply on the acts of violence committed but on the intent behind the acts. Intent to destroy a community may be determined by military orders, but fatwas and other religiously backed declarations which treat infidels and apostates as legitimate targets are also relevant. They need much more examination in genocide studies.

In the context of severe threat, it is remarkable that Bangladeshi women, some of whom were themselves survivors of violence, have spoken out about their experiences and helped to develop the international legal concept of sexual slavery. Firdausi Priyabhashini, who participated in the Tokyo Tribunal on the case of the comfort women, said, “I saw that the history of Muktijuddho (liberation war) was being altered and the torture of women were being forgotten, and then I saw rural women coming from the villages to be witnesses at the public court “(a people’s tribunal which was attacked by the then government). I decided from the civil society I will speak up.” “if I speak of my experiences, a space will open up, women will learn how to fight. [17]”

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P.S.

* Source: Center For Secular Space, December 2012.

<http://www.wluml.org/news/bangladesh-blasphemy-genocide-and-violence-against-women-case-bangladesh>

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Footnotes

[1] Two powerful men who supported Asia Bibi: Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab; and Shahbazz Bhatti, Minister for Minorities and the only Christian in the Cabinet; were both assassinated because they raised concerns about her case and Pakistan's blasphemy law. Salman Taseer's killer, his own bodyguard, became a national hero and lawyers lined up for the honour of defending him.

[2] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n23/owen-bennett-jones/questions-concerning-the-murder-of-benazir-bhutto>. Available on ESSF (article 27352), [Pakistan: Questions Concerning the Murder of Benazir Bhutto](#).

[3] <http://www.bangla2000.com/bangladesh/Independence-War/Report-Hamoodur-Rahman/default.shtm>

[4] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/gita-sahgal/bangladesh-forgotten-template-of-20th-century-war-0>. Available on ESSF (article 27355), [Bangladesh: the forgotten template of 20th century war](#).

[5] Cable from U.S. Consul General, Dacca, East Pakistan, to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (Apr. 6, 1971), which argued that "genocide was applicable" (quoted in Lawrence Lifshultz, Bangladesh, the Unfinished Revolution (1979). The cable, known as the Blood telegram after the brave US diplomat Archer Blood was signed by twenty U.S. diplomats in Pakistan and nine South Asia hands in the State Department. It represented dissent from the US position of support for Pakistan.

[6] The genocide convention defines genocide as "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such": As a result of investigations conducted by the Tribunal, the US government has started an investigation into a suspect in Bangladesh
<http://www.secularvoiceofbangladesh.org/Killar%20Ashrafuzzaman%20Khan.htm>

[7] Bina D'Costa and Sara Hossain, REDRESS FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMES TRIBUNAL IN BANGLADESH: LESSONS FROM HISTORY, AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE, Criminal Law Forum (2010) 21:331-359 _ Springer 2010

[8] http://www.secularvoiceofbangladesh.org/jahanara_imam_body.html

[9] http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/K_0054.HTM

[10] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx8VZiihNQE>

[11] http://www.bpedia.org/C_0250.php

[12] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selina_Parvin

[13] <http://dawn.com/2012/10/10/taliban-use-islamic-shariah-to-defend-malala-attack/>

[14] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2217367/NHS-boss-faces-death-penalty-charges-tort>

[ure-18-murders.html](#)

[15] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4A1Ev17ZTAY>

[16] <http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Laws-Penalizing-Blasphemy,-Apostasy-and-Defamation-of-Religion-are-Widespread.aspx>

[17] Rubaiyat Hossain, 'Trauma of the Women, Trauma of the Nation: a feminist discourse on Izzat, Liberation War Museum, Dhaka