

GENOCIDE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Rathore pounced on him.

"Do you know this man?"

"Yes, Sahib. He is Abdul Bari."

"Is he a fauji?"

"No Sahib, he is a tailor from Dacca."

"Tell me the truth."

"Khuda Kassam (God's oath), Sahib, he is a tailor."

There was a sudden silence. Rathore looked abashed as I told him: "For God's sake let him go. What more proof do you want of his innocence?"

But the jawans were apparently unconvinced and kept milling around Bari. It was only after I had once more interceded on his behalf that Rathore ordered Bari to be released. By that time he was a crumpled, speechless heap of terror. But his life had been saved.

Others have not been as fortunate

For six days as I travelled with the officers of the 9th Division headquarters at Comilla I witnessed at close quarters the extent of the killing. I saw Hindus, hunted from village to village and door to door, shot off-hand after a cursory "short-arm inspection" showed they were uncircumcised.

I have heard the screams of men bludgeoned to death in the compound of the Circuit House (civil administrative headquarters) in Comilla. I have seen truck loads of other human targets and those who had the humanity to try to help them hauled off under the cover of darkness and curfew. I have witnessed the

I have seen whole villages devastated by "punitive action." And in the officers' mess at night I have listened incredulously as otherwise brave and honourable men proudly chewed over the day's kill. "How many did you get?" The answers are seared in my

brutality of "kill and burn missions" as the army units, after clearing out the rebels, pursued the pogrom in the towns and the villages.

I have seen whole villages devastated by "punitive action." And in the officers' mess at night I have listened incredulously as otherwise brave and honourable men proudly chewed over the day's kill.

"How many did you get?" The answers are seared in my memory.

All this is being done, as any West Pakistani officer will tell you, for the "preservation of the unity, the integrity and the ideology of Pakistan." It is, of course, too late for that. The very military action that is designed to hold together the two wings of the country, separated by a thousand miles of India, has confirmed the ideological and emotional break.

East Bengal can only be kept in Pakistan by the heavy hand of the army. And the

army is dominated by the Punjabis, who traditionally despise and dislike the Bengalis.

The break is so complete today that few Bengalis will willingly be seen in the company of a West Pakistani. I had a distressing experience of this kind during my visit to Dacca when I went to visit an old friend. "I'm sorry," he told me as he turned away, "things have changed. The Pakistan that you and I knew has ceased to exist. Let us put it behind us."

Hours later a Punjabi army officer, talking about the massacre of the non-Bengalis before the army moved in, told



The government of Pakistan suppressed the horror inflicted by its army on unarmed civilians.

me: "They have treated us more brutally than the Sikhs did in the partition riots in 1947. How can we ever forgive or forget this?"

Annihilation of Hindus

The bone-crushing military operation has two distinctive features. One is what the authorities like to call the "cleansing process;" a euphemism for massacre. The other is the "rehabilitation effort."

This is a way of describing the moves to turn East Bengal into a docile colony of West Pakistan. These commonly used expressions and the repeated official references to "miscreants" and "infiltrators" are part of the charade which is being enacted for the benefit of the world. Strip away the propaganda, and the reality is colonisation -- and killing.

The justification for the annihilation of the Hindus was paraphrased by Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan, the Military Governor of East Pakistan, in a radio broadcast I heard on April 18. He said: "The Muslims of East Pakistan, who had played a leading part in the creation of Pakistan, are determined to keep it alive. However, the voice of the vast majority had been suppressed through coercion, threats to life and property by a vocal, violent and aggressive minority, which forced the Awami League to adopt the destructive course."

Others, speaking privately, were more blunt in seeking justification.

"The Hindus had completely undermined the Muslim masses with their money," Col. Naim, of 9th Division headquarters,

told me in the officers' mess at Comilla. They bled the province white. Money, food and produce flowed across the borders to India. In some cases they made up more than half the teaching staff in the colleges and schools, and sent their own children to be educated in Calcutta. It had reached the point where Bengali culture was in fact Hindu culture, and East Pakistan was virtually under the control of the Marwari businessmen in Calcutta. We have to sort them out to restore the land to the people, and the people to their Faith."

Or take Major Bashir. He came up from the ranks. He is SSO of the 9th Division at

Comilla and he boasts of a personal body count of 28. He had his own reasons for what has happened.

"This is a war between the pure and the impure," he informed me over a cup of green tea. "The people here may have Muslim names and call themselves Muslims. But they are Hindus at heart. You won't believe that the maulvi (mulla) of the Cantonment mosque here issued a fathwa (edict) during Friday prayers that the people would attain janat (paradise) if they killed West Pakistanis. We sorted the bastard out and we are now sorting out the others. Those who are left will be real Muslims. We will even teach them Urdu."

Everywhere I found officers and men fashioning imaginative garments of justification from the fabric of their own prejudices. Scapegoats had to be found to legitimise, even for their own consciences, the dreadful "solution" to what in essence was a political problem: the Bengalis won the election and wanted to rule.

The Punjabis, whose ambitions and interests have dominated government policies since the founding of Pakistan in 1947, would brook no erosion of their power. The army backed them up.

Officials privately justify what has been done as retaliation for the massacre of the non-Bengalis before the army moved in. But events suggest that the pogrom was not the result of a spontaneous or undisciplined reaction. It was planned.

General Tikka Khan takes over

It seems clear that the "sorting-out" began

to be planned about the time that Lt-Gen. Tikka Khan took over the governorship of East Bengal, from the gentle, self-effacing Admiral Ahsan, and the military command there, from the scholarly Lt-Gen. Sahibzada Khan.

That was at the beginning of March, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's civil disobedience movement was gathering momentum after the postponement of the assembly meeting from which the Bengalis hoped for so much. President Yahya Khan, it is said, acquiesced in the tide of resentment caused in the top echelons of the military establishment by the increasing humiliation of the West Pakistani troops stationed in East Bengal.

The Punjabi Eastern Command at Dacca continues to dominate the policies of the Central Government. [It is perhaps worth pointing out that the Khans are not related: Khan is a common surname in Pakistan.]

When the army units fanned out in Dacca on the evening of March 25, in pre-emptive strikes against the mutiny planned for the small hours of the next morning, many of them carried lists of people to be liquidated.

These included the Hindus and large numbers of Muslims; students, Awami Leaguers, professors, journalists and those who had been prominent in Sheikh Mujib's movement. The charge, now publicly made, that the army was subjected to mortar attack from the Jaganath Hall, where the Hindu university students lived, hardly justifies the obliteration of two Hindu colonies, built around the temples on Ramna race course, and a third in Shakrepati, in the heart of the old city.

Nor does it explain why the sizeable Hindu populations of Dacca and the neighbouring industrial town of Narayanganj should have vanished so completely during the round-the-clock curfew on March 26 and 27. There is similarly no trace of scores of Muslims who were rounded up during the curfew hours. These people were eliminated in a planned operation: an improvised response to Hindu aggression would have had different results.

Touring Dacca on April 15 I found the heads of four students lying rotting on the roof of the Iqbal Hall hostel. The caretaker said they had been killed on the night of March 25. I also found heavy traces of blood on the two staircases and in four of the rooms. Behind Iqbal Hall a large residential building seemed to have been singled out for special attention by the army. The walls were pitted with bullet holes and a foul smell still lingered on the staircase, although it had been heavily powdered with DDT. Neighbours said the bodies of 23 women and children had been carted away only hours before. They had been decomposing on the roof since March 25. It was only after much question-ing that I was able to ascertain that the victims belonged to the nearby Hindu shanties. They had sought shelter in the building as the army closed in.

THIS IS GENOCIDE conducted with amazing casualness. Sitting in the office of Major Agha, Martial Law Administrator of Comilla city, on the morning of April 19, I saw the off-hand manner in which sentences were meted out.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8