

# GENOCIDE

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A Bihari sub-inspector of police had walked in with a list of prisoners being held' in the police lock-up. Agha looked it over. Then, with a flick of his pencil, he casually ticked off four names on the list.

"Bring these four to me this evening for disposal," he said. He looked at the list again. The pencil flicked once more. "... and bring this thief along with, them."

## Death sentence over Cold Drink

The death sentence had been pronounced over a glass of coconut milk. I was informed that two of the prisoners were Hindus, the third a "student," and the fourth an Awami League organiser. The "thief," it transpired, was a lad named Sebastian who had been caught moving the household effects of a Hindu friend to his own house.

Later that evening I saw these men, their hands and legs tied loosely with, a single rope, being led down the road to the Circuit House compound. A little after curfew, which was at 6 o'clock, a flock of squawking mynah birds were disturbed in their play by the thwacking sound of wooden clubs meeting bone and flesh.

Captain Azmat of the Baluch Regiment had two claims to fame according to the mess banter. One was his job as ADC to Maj.-Gen. Shaukat Raza. Commanding officer of the 9th Division. The other was thrust on him by his colleagues' ragging.

Azmat, it transpired, was the only officer in the group who had not made a "kill" Major Bashir needed him mercilessly.

There were, of course, soldiers-hundreds of unsmiling men in khaki, each with an automatic rifle. According to orders, the rifles never left their hands. The roads are constantly patrolled by tough, trigger-happy men. Wherever the army is, you

"Come on Azmat" Bashir told him one night, "we are going to make a man of you. Tomorrow we will see how you can make them run. It's so easy."

To underscore the point Bashir went into one of his long spiels. Apart from his duties as SSO, Bashir was also "education officer" 'at Headquarters. He was the only Punjabi officer I found who could speak Bengali fluently. By general agreement Bashir was also a self-taught bore who gloried in the sound of his own voice.

A *dari walla* (bearded man) we were told, had come to see Bashir that morning to inquire about his brother, a prominent Awami League organiser of Comilla who had been netted by the army some days earlier. Dhor gaya, Bashir said he told him: "He has run away. The old man could'nt comprehend how his brother could have escaped on a broken leg. Neither could I. So Major Bashir, with a



The 'Cleansing process' was a euphemism for massacre.

broad wink, enlightened me. The record would show dhor gaya: "shot while escaping."

I never did find out whether Captain Azmat got his kill.

The rebel Bengali forces who had dug in at Feni, seventy miles north of Chittagong on the highway to Comilla, had tied down the 9th Division by destroying all the bridges and culverts in the area. General Raza was getting hell from the Eastern Command at Dacca which was anxious to have the south-eastern border sealed against escaping rebels. It was also desperately urgent to open this only land route to the north to much-needed supplies that had been piling up in the port at Chittagong.

So General Raza was understandably waspish. He flew over the area almost daily. He also spent hours haranguing the brigade that, was bogged down at Feni. Captain Azmat, as usual, was the General's shadow. I did not see him again. But if experience is any pointer, Azmat probably had to sweat out his "kill" and the ragging for another three weeks.

It was only on May 8 that the 9th Division was able to clear Feni and the surrounding area. By then the Bengali rebels, forced out by relentless bombing and artillery barrages, had escaped with their weapons across the neighbouring border into India.

The escape of such large numbers of armed, hard-core regulars among the Bengali rebels was a matter of grave concern to Lt.-Col. Aslam Baig, G-1 at 9th Division headquarters.

"The Indians," he explained, will "obviously not allow them to settle there. It would be too dangerous. So they will be allowed in on sufferance as long as they keep making sorties across the border. Unless we can kill them off, we are going to have serious trouble for a long time."

Lt. Col. Baig was a popular artillery

officer who had done a stint in China after the India-Pakistan war when units of the Pakistan Army were converting to Chinese equipment. He was said to be a proud family man. He also loved Cowers. He told me with unconcealed pride that during a previous posting at Comilla he had brought from China the giant scarlet waterlillies that adorn the pond opposite the headquarters. Major Bashir adored him. Extolling one officer's decisiveness Bashir told me that once they had caught a rebel officer there was a big fuss about what should be done with him.

"While the others were telephoning all over for instructions," he said, "he solved the problem. Dhor gaya. Only the man's foot was left sticking out of the ditch."

It is hard to imagine so much brutality in the midst of so much beauty. Comilla was blooming when I went there towards the end of April. The rich green carpet of rice paddies spreading to the horizon on both sides of the road was broken here and there by bright splashes of red. That was the Gol Mohor, aptly dubbed the "Flame, of the Forest," coming to full bloom. Mango and coconut trees in the villages dotting the countryside were heavy with fruit. Even the terrier-sized goats skipping across the road gave evidence of the abundance of nature in Bengal. "The only way you can tell the male from the female," they told me, "is that all the she-goats are pregnant."

## Fire and Murder their vengeance

In one of the most crowded areas of the entire world, Comilla district has a population density of 1,900 to the square mile-only man was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are the Bengalis?" I had asked my escorts in the strangely empty streets of Dacca a few days earlier. They have gone to the villages, - was the stock reply.

Now, in the countryside, there were still no Bengalis. Comilla town like Dacca was heavily shuttered. And in ten miles on the

road to Laksham, past silent villages, the peasants I saw could have been counted on the fingers of both hands.

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Martial law orders, constantly repeated on the radio and in the Press, proclaim the death penalty for any one caught in the act of sabotage. If a road is obstructed or a bridge damaged or destroyed, all houses within 10 yards of the spot are liable to be demolished and their inhabitants rounded up.

The practice is even more terrible than anything the words could suggest. "Punitive action" is something that the Bengalis have come to dread.

We saw what this meant when we were approaching Hajiganj, which straddles the road to Chandpur, on the morning of April 17. A few miles before Hajiganj, a 15-foot bridge had been damaged the previous night by rebels who were still active in the area. According to Major Rathore (G-2 Ops.), an army unit had immediately been sent out to take punitive action. Long spirals of smoke could be seen on all sides up to a distance of a quarter of a mile from the damaged bridge. And as we carefully drove over a bed of wooden boards, with which it had been hastily repaired, we could see houses in the village on the right beginning to catch fire.

At the back of the village some jawans were spreading the flames with dried coconut fronds. They make excellent kindling and are normally used for cooking.

We could also see a body sprawled between the coconut trees at the entrance

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