

GENOCIDE

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to the village. On other side of the road another village in the rice paddies showed evidence of the fire that had gutted more than a dozen bamboo and mat huts. Hundreds of villagers had escaped before the army came. Others, like the man among the coconut trees, were slow to get away.

As we drove on, Major Rathore said, "They brought it on themselves." I said it was surely too terrible a vengeance on innocent people for the acts of a handful of rebels. He did not answer.

A few hours later when we were again passing through Hajiganj on the way back from Chandpur, I had my first exposure to the savagery of a "kill and burn mission".

We were still caught up in the aftermath of a tropical storm which had hit the area that afternoon. A heavy overcast made ghostly shadows on the mosque towering above the town.

Light drizzle was beginning to wet the uniforms of Captain Azhar and the four jawans riding in the exposed escort jeep behind us.

We turned a corner and found a convoy of trucks parked outside the mosque. I counted seven, all filled with jawans in battle dress. At the head of the column was a jeep. Across the road two men, supervised by a third, were trying to batter down the door of one of more than a hundred shuttered shops lining the road. The studded teak wood door was beginning to give under the combined assault of two axes as Major Rathore brought the Toyota to a halt.

"What the hell are you doing?"

The tallest of the trio, who was supervising the break-in, turned and peered at us. "Mota," (Fatty) he shouted, "what the hell do you think we are doing?"

Recognising the voice, Rathore drew a water-melon smile. It was, he informed me, his old friend "Ifty" Major Iftikhar of the 12th Frontier Force Rifles.

Rathore: "I thought someone was looting."

Iftikhar: "Looting? No. We are on kill and burn." Waving his hand to take in the shops, he said he was going to destroy the

Rathore: "How many did you get?"

Iftikhar smiled bashfully.

Rathore: "Come on. How many did you get?"

Iftikhar: "Only twelve. And by God we were lucky to get them. We would have lost those, too, if I hadn't sent my men from the back."

PRODDED by Major Rathore, Iftikhar then went on to describe vividly how after much searching in Hajiganj he had discovered twelve Hindus hiding in a house on the outskirts of the town. These had been "disposed of." Now Major Iftikhar was on the second part of his mission: burn.

By this time the shop's door had been demobilised and we found ourselves looking into one of those tiny catch-all establishments which, in these parts, go under the title "Medical & Stores." Under the Bengali lettering the signboard carried in English the legend "Ashok Medical & Stores." Lower down was painted "Prop. A. M. Bose." Mr. Bose, like the rest of the people of Hajiganj, had locked and run away.

In front of the shop a small display cabinet was crammed with patent

medicines, cough syrups, some bottles of mango squash, imitation jewellery, reels of coloured cotton, thread and packets of knicker elastic. Iftikhar kicked it over, smashing the light wood-work into kindling. Next he reached out for some jute shopping bags on one shelf. He took some plastic toys from another. A bundle of handkerchiefs and a small bolt of red cloth joined the pile on the floor.

Iftikhar heaped them all together and borrowed a matchbox from one of the jawans sitting in our Toyota. The jawan had ideas of his own. Jumping from the vehicle he ran to the shop and tried to pull down one of the umbrellas hanging from the low ceiling of the shop. Iftikhar ordered him out. Looting, he was sharply reminded, was against orders.

Iftikhar soon had a fire going. He threw burning jute bags into one corner of the shop, the bolt of cloth into another. The shop began to blaze. Within minutes we could hear the crackle of flames behind shuttered doors as the fire spread to the shop on the left, then on to the next one.

At this point Rathore was beginning to



A country left ravaged and depleted by mindless violence.

get anxious about the gathering darkness. So we drove on.

When I chanced to meet Major Iftikhar the next day he ruefully told me: "I burnt only sixty houses. If it hadn't rained I would have got the whole bloody lot."

Approaching a village a few miles from Mudarfarganj we were forced to a halt by what appeared to be a man crouching against a mud wall. One of the jawans warned it might be a fauji sniper. But after careful scouting it turned out to be a lovely young Hindu girl. She sat there with the placidity of her people, waiting for God knows who. One of the jawans had been ten years with the East Pakistan Rifles and could speak bazaar Bengali. He was told to order her into the village. She mumbled something in reply, but stayed where she was, but was ordered a second time. She was still sitting there as we drove away. "She has," I was informed, "nowhere to go -- no family, no home."

Major Iftikhar was one of several officers assigned to kill and burn missions. They moved in after the rebels had been cleared by the army with the freedom to

comb-out and destroy Hindus and "miscreants" (the official jargon for rebels) and to burn down everything in the areas from which the army had been fired at.

Three shots to kill a man

This lanky Punjabi officer liked to talk about his job. Riding with Iftikhar to the Circuit House in Comilla on another occasion he told me about his latest exploit.

"We got an old one," he said. "The bastard had grown a beard and was posing as a devout Muslim even called himself Abdul Manan. But we gave him a medical inspection and the game was up."

Iftikhar continued: "I wanted to finish him there and then, but my men told me such a bastard deserved three shots. So I gave him one in the balls, then one in the stomach. Then I finished him off with a shot in the head."

When I left Major Iftikhar he was headed north to Bramanbaria. His mission: Another kill and burn.

Overwhelmed with terror the Bengalis have one of two reactions. Those who can

matter how the Pakistani flags were made, so long as they were adorned with the crescent and star. So they came in all sizes, shapes and colours. Some flaunted blue fields, instead of the regulation green.

Obviously they had been hastily put together with the same material that had been used for the Bangladesh flag. Indeed, blue Pakistani flags were more common than the green. The scene in Chandpur was repeated in Hajiganj, Madarfarganj, Kasba, Brahmanbaria; all ghost towns gay with flags.

Laksham was an example of the other reaction; cringing

When I drove into the town the morning after it had been cleared of the rebels, all I could see was the army and literally thousands of Pakistani flags. The major in charge there had camped in the police station, and it was there that Major Rathore took us. My colleague, a Pakistani TV cameraman, had to make a propaganda film about the "return to normalcy" in Laksham -- one of the endless series broadcast daily showing welcome parades and "peace meetings."

A 'Parade' and a Knowing Wink

I wondered how he could manage it but the Major said it would be no sweat. "There are enough of these bastards left to put on a good show. Give me 20 minute-s."

Lieutenant Javed of the 39 Baluch was assigned the task of rounding up a crowd. He called out to an elderly bearded man who had apparently been brought in for questioning. The man, who later gave his name as Moulana Said Mohammad Saidul Huq, insisted he was a "staunch Muslim League and not from the Awami League" (The Muslim League led the movement for an independent Pakistan in 1947). He was all too eager to please. "I will very definitely get you at least 60 men in 20 minutes," he told Javed. "But if you give me two hours I will bring 200."

Moulana Saidul Huq was as good as his word. We had hardly drunk our flit of the deliciously refreshing coconut milk that had been thoughtfully supplied by the Major when we heard shouts in the distance. "Pakistan Zindabad!" "Pakistan, army Zindabad!" "Muslim League Zindabad!" they were chanting. (Zindabad is Urdu for "Long live!")

Moments later they marched into view, a motley crowd of about 50 old and decrepit men and knee-high children, all waving Pakistani flags and shouting at the top of their voices. Lt. Javed gave me a knowing wink.

Within minutes the parade had grown into a "public meeting" complete with a make-shift public address system and a rapidly multiplying group of would-be speakers.

Mr. Mahbub-ur-Rahman was pushed forward to make the address of welcome to the army. He introduced himself as "N.F. College Professor of English and Arabic who had also tried for History and is a life-time member of the great Muslim, League Party."

Introduction over, Mahbub-ur-Rahman gave forth with gusto. "Punjabis and Bengalis," he said, "had united for Pakistan and we had our own traditions and culture. But we were terrorised

run away just seem to vanish. Whole towns have been abandoned as the army approached. Those who can't run away adopt a cringing servility which only adds humiliation to their plight. Chandpur was an example of the first.

In the past this key river port on the Meghna was noted for its thriving business houses and gay life. At night thousands of small country boats anchored on the river's edge made it a fairy land of lights. On April 18 Chandpur was deserted. No people, no boats. Barely one per cent of the population had remained. The rest, particularly the Hindus who constituted nearly half the population, had fled.

Weirdly they had left behind thousands of Pakistani flags fluttering from every house, shop and rooftop. The effect was like a national day celebration without the crowds. It only served to emphasise the haunted look. The flags were by way of insurance.

Somehow the word had got around that the army considered any structure without a Pakistani flag to be hostile and consequently to be destroyed. It did not