

# Remembering the barbarities of Operation Searchlight

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ON the fateful night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistani army officially launched its campaign of genocide in erstwhile East Pakistan, by unleashing death squads that mercilessly killed 7,000 unarmed, innocent Bengalis in one single night. In the Pakistani national elections of December 1970, the Awami League had received the majority of votes and won an overwhelming victory across Bengali territory. On February 22, 1971, the military generals in West Pakistan, who hitherto enjoyed the throne, took a decision to crush the Awami League and its supporters. It was recognised from the outset that a genocidal campaign would be necessary to eradicate the threat of Bengalis demanding basic democratic and human rights: "Kill three million of them," said President Yahya Khan at a February conference, "and the rest will eat out of our hands."

The prime targets of Operation Searchlight were the Dhaka University teachers and students, the lifeblood of the resistance movement, who were exterminated in their hundreds. The Pakistani army sought out those especially likely to join the resistance—young boys. In the next morning, bodies of young men would be found in fields, floating down rivers, or near army camps.

Anthony Mascarenhas, a British journalist based in Pakistan, who was the first to break the news of the Bengali genocide in international media, reported a Pakistani army major telling him: "This is a war between the pure and the impure... The people here may have Muslim names and call themselves Muslims. But they are Hindu at heart. We are now sorting them out... Those who are left will be real Muslims. We will even teach them Urdu."

Meherunnesa Chowdhury, who was a Senior House Tutor of Rokeya Hall, described how female student halls were raided by army men, who, before brush-firing hundreds

of students to death in their own dorms, would look for girls they thought were "pretty" and would capture and drag them to their army trucks, never to be seen again. Male students were lined outside their dorms and shot execution-style in batches, while others were made to dig mass graves and bury their newly deceased friends. After their job was done, they, too, were shot to death and buried on top of their friends.

Other mass graves were dug by the army where people, dead or alive, were hastily buried and later bulldozed. Anwar Pasha, in

violating the curfew order". Survivors described how human corpses lay as far as the eye could see, charred and roasted on the streets, the sidewalks and the portico of homes. Pasha describes the body of a son and a father on the roof of a building, the sight of which was particularly unsettling. The father had tried to protect his son, dearer than his own life, by spreading his own body over his, like a veritable shield. Alas, despite the father's best efforts, the machine gun's bullets had pierced through both of them as they lay in that position.



The Pakistan army's premeditated attack on unarmed civilians in Dhaka on March 25 spared no one.

his docu-novel, *Rifle, Roti, Aurat*, describes the sight of the fingers of some just-buried people sticking out from under the ground like baby plants, which fought for life, but could not quite make it. The Pakistani soldiers knew all the "noble" arts of warfare. First, they set fire to the houses of slum dwellers, and then when they came out, half-burnt, running on the streets in panic, the army mowed them down with bullets "for

Children described how they, while hiding underneath the bed to escape detection from the army, had to witness their parents being shot to death, as their lifeless bodies crashed against the bedroom floor, creating a pool of blood which soon seeped into their own hands and faces. Their heart signalled them to scream their lungs out, but their brains instructed them to keep silent, unless they, too, wanted to be shot and killed. A father

described how his 14-day-old baby daughter was thrown outside the window by the army, in front of his very eyes. When he screamed in protest, he too was shot and lost consciousness ("Operation Searchlight", Boishakhi TV documentary).

Zakaria Masud described how his father, Professor Moniruzzaman, head of the Department of Statistics at the University of Dhaka, and elder brother were similarly killed. The army banged against their door at the dead of night, but since no response came from the other side, they broke it open with heavy boots and searched for the professor. Upon finding the professor, they dragged him and his son by the stairs and after reaching the driveway, they asked him to sit down on the floor. He refused. So they shot his left calf, and blood began to spill seamlessly. The army asked him to sit again, but the professor remained steadfast in his denial and so they finally shot him in the forehead and he fell to the floor, never to rise again.

Professor Meghna Guhathakurta describes how her father, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, an English teacher at Dhaka University, was picked up from their house by the army, and how her mother had innocently handed her husband an extra pair of clothes, should he need to spend the night outside. Moments later, they heard rounds of gunfire upon which they stormed out of their door to find the freshly shot bodies of their beloved neighbours, Professor Moniruzzaman and his son, gasping for life.

On the same night, the offices of leading national newspapers like the *Daily Ittefaq*, the *Daily Sangbad* and the *People* were set on fire for reporting the truth and supporting the Bengali movement, killing a large number of top journalists and media personnel, who were burnt to death inside these offices. Soldiers razed the Kali Mandir, a Hindu temple, to the ground and blew up the Central Shaheed Minar in a similar fashion. On the streets, common citizens were murdered at random. Rickshaw pullers were shot to death in their sleep as they lay on their three-wheeled.

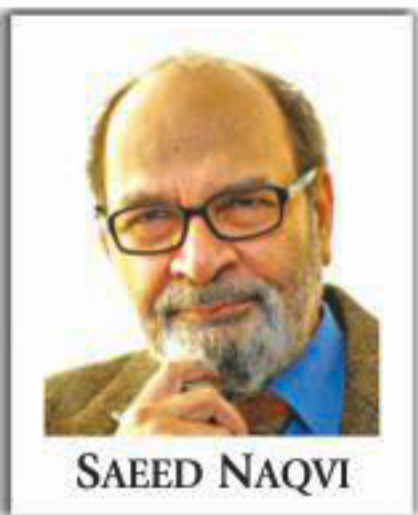
On the eve of this genocidal campaign, then-president Yahya Khan left Dhaka for Karachi, but Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then president of the Pakistan People's Party, casually observed the operation from the balcony of his luxurious presidential suite at the Hotel Intercontinental, Dhaka. He saw Dhaka burning in front of his very eyes, heard the helpless cries of innocent civilians, the crackle of burning material, the roar of tanks, the boom of guns and the rattle of machine guns. Yet the very next day, Bhutto, on the eve of his departure, highly appreciated the action of the army and commented: "Thanks to God that Pakistan could have been saved."

Sadly, in spite of the overwhelming evidence, footage of the killings, the mass graves, innumerable eyewitness accounts and the factual coverage by foreign journalists during 1971, the Bangladeshi genocide has still not been recognised as such by the United Nations. Even more repulsively, the Pakistani government, far from issuing an official apology, continues to deny that such atrocities even occurred, going as far as showing solidarity for the war criminals of 1971 and shielding them from prosecution. It is deeply regrettable that while some Pakistani citizens and academics have acknowledged and condemned this genocide, the Pakistani government has shamelessly chosen to remain in denial. This is precisely why the truth of the Black Night of March 25, 1971 must be brought to light, so everyone, both in and outside Pakistan, finally gets to know about the world's most forgotten genocide and us, Bangladeshis, finally get to see Pakistan's own version of Nuremberg Trials take place.

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Sources for the piece include "The Rape of Bangladesh" by Anthony Mascarenhas, *Rifle, Roti, Aurat* by Anwar Pasha, *Massacre: The Tragedy at Bangla Desh* by Robert Payne, and a Boishakhi TV Documentary titled "Operation Searchlight".

# Thanks to Ardern, New Zealand today soothes the soul



THOSE who have rushed to psychoanalyse 28-year-old Australian, Brenton Tarrant, for the outrage in

Christchurch mosques killing 50 people, are concealing the reality, possibly without their knowing it. This line of inquiry will not explain why Christchurch or Pulwama, Utrecht and now Birmingham happened.

When Phoolan Devi, the low-caste "mallah" (boatwoman), shot dead 22 high-caste Rajputs in the village of Behmai, 80 km from Kanpur in UP on February 4, 1981, she had taken the law into her own hands. This she had done because no law enforcement agency had come to her rescue when the very same men had locked her in a room and taken turns, repeatedly, to rape her over weeks. It was gross injustice she was fighting.

During the British mandate over Palestine, Jews formed Haganah, a secret, militant organisation—guns, hand grenades et al—to protect Jewish enclaves against "Arab gangs". Why was Haganah formed? Perceived injustice. In 1939, the British produced a White Paper restricting Jewish immigration. That is when the French-built ocean liner *Patria*,

carrying nearly 2,000 Jews to Mauritius, was sunk off Haifa killing 267 people. Later, the same group—its offshoot Irgun—bombed the King David hotel in Jerusalem, killing 28 British soldiers. Both were ghoulis acts. But would Menachem Begin, member of Haganah and later Prime Minister, have seen it this way? According to their lights, Begin and, indeed, the entire Haganah outfit were fighting British injustice.

April 13 will be the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar. Colonel Reginald Dyer's character or a psychoanalysis will not shed light on whether or not police action was required on a scale that killed 1,000 people. The official British figure was 379 dead. Lt. Governor of Punjab, Gen. Michael O'Dwyer justified military action on administrative grounds. This is not the way Udham Singh the nationalist saw the massacre. He turned up in the UK and shot dead Gen. O'Dwyer on March 13, 1940 at the Caxton hall, now Royal Society for Royal Affairs. It was injustice he was fighting.

In his trial, Udham Singh said: "He wanted to crush the spirit of my people, so I crushed him. For full 21 years, I have been trying to wreak vengeance. I am happy that I have done the job." There is a series of such incidents which the state would have considered acts of terror. The perpetrators have been celebrated as

martyrs and patriots including the great Bhagat Singh. They were fighting an unequal battle against injustice.

During a visit to Libya, Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State appeared on global TV making a "V" sign and blurting out the unforgettable line, "I came, I saw and he died." Even as she spoke this masterpiece of callousness, appeared on the screen images of Qaddafi screaming, being sodomised by a knife. Would this not have made the Libyan blood boil with sheer helplessness?

And not just Libya. Imagine the relentless destruction of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, all the 9/11 wars. Millions are killed. Begins the migrant trek to Europe which all but shuts its doors, forgetting that just the other day it was complicit in destroying their homes, their cities and villages.

The samples I have touched upon are of people experiencing injustice, suffocated and, presumably, waiting for their time. But the perpetrator of the Christchurch outrage is in a different category. He experienced no injustice. His phobia, like that of his fellow murderer from Norway, Anders Breivik, derives from the contemporary curse called the global media. They have been fed on the post-Soviet Union, post-9/11 wars as mentioned above. But they have seen these stories covered by a media which has mysteriously cast victims as villains. Jean Raspail's novel *Camp*



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern.

PHOTO: AFP

of the *Saints* shows destruction of Western civilisation through third-world immigration. This becomes Tarrant's nightmare.

I was witness to the launch of the global media in Baghdad in January-February 1991. The Operation Desert Storm was covered live by Peter Arnett of the CNN. Not to comprehend the significance of this event is to miss out on the nature of International Affairs in the post-Soviet period. Remember, the Berlin wall fell in 1989; Soviet Union came down like melting ice cream in 1991. This was the first time in human history that coverage of a war was brought live into our drawing rooms.

The coverage divided the world into two hostile camps—the triumphant West and the defeated, demoralised Muslim nations. This critical division got amplified exponentially as the two Intefadas erupted, followed by the four-year-long Bosnia war bringing, once again, the brutalities heaped upon Bosnian Muslims, day after day. The climax came with the 9/11 wars and the unbelievable fireworks over Afghanistan.

With each war and accompanying global coverage, the West-Muslim divide widened. It was this atmosphere so thoroughly saturated with Islamophobia that shaped the

minds of Breivik and Brenton Tarrant. Leaders like George W Bush, Tony Blair and Australia's John Howard cynically used this "othering" of the world's Muslims as a strategy for western cohesion. Fear of terrorism, real or simulated, resulted in loss of status of foreign offices. Intelligence agencies acquired saliency.

In India, the sheer hypocrisy of the elite shrouded and thereby aggravated a corresponding division between non-Muslims and Muslims stoked by our anchors. The new liberal economic policies of the 90s demanded a multiplication of TV channels. This coincided with accelerated communalisation after the fall of the Babari Masjid in 1992. Capitalism and communalism joined hands and set the national agenda conducive to the consolidation of Hindu nationalism. In the ranks of these nationalists, it would not be impossible to find the willingness to give a sympathetic quarter to Brenton Tarrant. But to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern goes the credit for having taken the fierce current head-on. Conduct an opinion poll anywhere: she is the compassionate leader the world is looking for. Donald Trump minimised the outrage and all but approved of Tarrant. Thanks to Ardern, New Zealand today feels like a land for pilgrimage to soothe the soul.

Saeed Naqvi is a senior Indian Journalist, television commentator and interviewer.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**JOHN GALSWORTHY**  
English novelist and playwright (1867-1933)

*Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Furrowed feature
- 5 Grow paler
- 9 Bit of gossip
- 11 Perfect
- 13 Japanese port
- 14 Social group
- 15 Silvery gray
- 16 Fall
- 18 Personal logs
- 20 Ball
- 21 Battery part
- 22 Judicious
- 23 Scrollwork shape
- 24 Scrimdle
- 25 Finger-paints
- 27 Hollowed out
- 29 Screw up

**DOWN**

- 1 Wide
- 2 Finland neighbor
- 3 Midwest city
- 4 Bowl shaped pan
- 5 Popular house-plant
- 6 First fellow
- 7 Midwest city
- 8 Restaurant patrons
- 10 Rafting hazard
- 12 Not bother
- 17 Spike of film
- 19 Flag maker
- 22 Frayed
- 24 Waist shaper
- 25 First appearance
- 26 Sports spots
- 27 Nasty dog
- 28 Evaded
- 30 Sea birds
- 31 Jury members
- 33 Julia Louis-Dreyfus show
- 37 Swear

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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

HOW DID YOU GET SO SUNBURNED, ZERO? I TOLD YOU TO USE SUNSCREEN. I DID. AND IT TASTED AWFUL!

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

WHY WOULD YOU EVEN DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS, HAMMIE? TO SCAPE ZOE. DOES IT HURT? NOT REALLY. IT'S JUST KIND OF HEAVY AND SLIMY. THEN I GUESS YOU WON'T TRY IT AGAIN. WELL, NOT UNTIL NEXT HALLOWEEN SEASON.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

AVID STOMP  
TONED CANOE  
BINGE AMPLE  
ALE CARPOOL  
TARPIT ITE  
EMMY NOD  
NANA ONTV  
HAM LOGO  
OTO FAROUT  
BAREXAM PRO  
ALIVE AMIGO  
RISEN TENET  
TETRA NESS