



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

BANGLADESH GENOCIDE OF 1971

Time for the West to walk the talk

Mrinal Sircar is a freedom fighter of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh.

MRINAL SIRCAR

April 2022: Bucha, Ukraine

The whole world knows about the Bucha massacre of April 2022. There is photographic and video evidence from Western sources, including specific details of how many bodies were recovered, how many of them were children under the age of 18, how many people were killed by weapons and how many appeared to have died of natural causes related to the occupation. The scenes on the streets of Bucha were horrific and heartbreaking, to say the least, notwithstanding Russia’s denial of it being authentic. The Western powers were quick to condemn President Vladimir Putin for the massacre, and some went further by terming it a genocide. The Western propaganda machines cried out in chorus condemning Russia.

But, for millions of Bangladeshis, the scene in Bucha in April 2022 took them back to May 1971.

May 1971: Chuknagar, Khulna, Bangladesh

On May 20, 1971, over a period of six hours between 11am and 5pm, at least 10,000 people (eye witnesses claim the number is much higher), were subjected to wanton killing at Chuknagar, a small township in Khulna district. People, mostly from the Hindu community, gathered at Chuknagar from Khulna and neighbouring districts to cross the border with India and escape targeted killings. Pakistani soldiers raided Chuknagar to carry out a brutal carnage. Bhadra, the small river flowing through Chuknagar, went red with the blood of the fallen. Most of the dead bodies found their “graves” on the river’s bed.

The Chuknagar incident is only one of hundreds of such genocidal episodes that took place during the nine-month-long war of independence. But the world knows nothing about the Chuknagar genocide. And, on a larger scale, much about the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971. Why so? Unfortunately, the world is yet to be fair for all. It seems that such incidents must fit into the geopolitical, strategic or national security interests of the US and its allies in order to receive recognition. When such violence takes place in Europe or in the US, news of those immediately occupy the centre stage, while similar things happening in Asia, Africa or Latin America become simply peripheral, often to be ignored or even forgotten.

Geopolitical motivation outweighs humanitarian cause

Fifty-two years should create enough historical distance in terms of time and space for the UN, the US and its allies, and the community of nations at large to view dispassionately their respective roles when the Pakistani military was carrying out its brutal genocide in 1971, when three million people were killed, over 200,000 women were raped by Pakistan’s military, more than 10 million people were forced to flee to India as refugees, and almost half of Bangladesh’s population was internally displaced. It was never a lack of evidence, but biased, narrow and self-seeking political motivations that have thus far obstructed the recognition of the genocide. It was no other sources than the US Consulate in Dhaka that reported early in April 1971 to the State Department that what was happening in then East Pakistan was no less than a genocide, and “Our government has evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy” (*The Blood Telegram*, April 6, 1971). In June 1971, *The Sunday Times* published Anthony Mascarenhas’ article titled “Genocide,” which vividly exposed the scale of the genocidal carnage carried out by the Pakistan Army. The report shook the conscience of people around the world. There were also Simon Dring of *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney Schanberg of *The New York Times*, and many others who demonstrated their journalistic as well as humanistic courage in informing the world about the genocidal savagery of the Pakistan Army.

There was also Joan Baez’s “*Song of Bangladesh*,” and George Harrison and friends’ famous Concert for Bangladesh. Allen Ginsberg’s poem “*September on Jessore Road*” gives a vivid, heart-wrenching description of the situation then which still reverberates through the hearts of millions:

“Millions of Souls nineteen seventy-one

homeless on Jessore road under grey sun
A million are dead, the million who can
Walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan...”

But, alas! The denial sees no end. Nothing could penetrate the deaf ears of the US administration. Gary J Bass’ book *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide* unravels facts behind President Richard Nixon and Foreign Secretary Henry Kissinger’s stance as to how Bangladesh became “collateral damage” when they were pursuing back-channel diplomacy using General Yahya Khan, their friend, as a conduit to achieve a rapprochement between Washington

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and Beijing. Bass cited Kissinger’s comments, in which he’d said that “a humanitarian concern is not necessarily an American concern.” In the bipolar world of the 70s, was defending Pakistan at all costs so critical to the US geopolitical interests? Even at the cost of millions being murdered?

Of late, there is also some good news

In recent times, some internationally reputed organisations, such as Genocide Watch, Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, and International Association of Genocide Scholars made appeals to the UN and the international community to recognise the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971. While multi-disciplinary research contributes immensely, excuses for more evidence, for more scholarly research, are indeed getting narrower. The recent bipartisan resolution submitted by US Congressmen Steven Chabot and Ro Khanna to recognise Bangladesh genocide kindles some hope in our minds.

The National Parliament of Bangladesh passed a motion in 2017 to commemorate March 25 as Genocide Day. While the demands from the civil society, the government, and from relevant international organisations are getting louder, the Bangladesh Genocide issue has also been discussed in the last couple of years at side events of the International Human Rights Council sessions.

It’s time for the West to walk the talk

The avowed Western values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and a rules-based world order appear quite hypocritical to non-Western audiences when they see the selective approach of Western powers when applying those values. It’s time for the West to practise what they preach in an emerging world where unipolar moments seem to be a thing of the past. The same applies to the United Nations, which is still structured to enable Western dominance. Some serious measures to redress the past grievances of the Global South will significantly contribute to establishing the much-needed mutual trust and respect. There will be only winners in such a restructured engagement process.

Bangladesh, indeed, represents one of those serious cases of the past grievances. “I paid a price for my dissent. But I had no choice,” Archer K Blood told *The Washington Post* in 1982. “The line between right and wrong was just too clear-cut.”

We can reasonably hope, after 52 years, that the UN, the US, and other countries will see the line between right and wrong as being clear-cut like Blood had. Bangladesh, as a nation, and the families of millions of victims look forward to the day when the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971, one of the darkest chapters of human history, will receive international recognition.

Plains of protest



KNOT SO TRUE

Dr Rubana Huq is the vice-chancellor of Asian University for Women.

RUBANA HUQ

Of my four grandchildren, my grandsons are the sweetest. Calm, kind, helpful. On the contrary, my two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter takes to the streets (literally) and protests when something isn’t going her way. The other one, who’s barely one-and-a-half, screams at the top of her voice and keeps all of us under control.

Strangely, I am happy to see these angels in rebellion. After all, our time has come. Women have protested far less in share.

Contemporary protests, like those of my extra feisty granddaughters, are unique in form and degree. It was only last year that we saw blank A4 papers being held up as a form of protest in one part of Asia. The confinement of three lockdown years of Covid, the frustration of children growing up in total isolation, neighbourhoods popping with frustration... all were being represented by the blank papers. The papers, perhaps, symbolised disappearing dissent.

People are also dancing in protest, not so much to perform or wow the audience, but more in sync with the somatic study of the body as perceived from within. These dancers say they are like goldfish wanting to know the ocean, rejecting the bowl while being in it.

Two years ago, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez wore a gown to the Met Gala, which had the theme of “American Independence.” AOC walked in wearing something of a bridal gown, but the slogan scribbled on the back in bold red read, “Tax the Rich.” That, too, was a protest.

Pope.L, a performing artiste, has been crawling since 1978 in protest. He has been on his hands, elbows, stomach, and knees, wearing many fantasy costumes accompanied by his Nike sneakers, and has often caught the attention of people passing him by, making them “look down.” A Rutgers graduate, Pope.L is bitter about people losing “verticality,” and for not sparing even a nanosecond’s glance for the homeless. His knee

imposing lines, language, religion or tradition.

In between 1948 and 1991, South Africa witnessed violence and protests as unequal education rocked the landscape. In 1961, only 10 percent of Black teachers graduated high school. In June of 1976, almost 10,000 students marched and protested; armed police attacked and killed more than 500, and injured about a thousand. That drew condemnation

Not too long ago, students led reforms in this land of ours. They marched for language, died for our mothertongue, and became immortal symbols of struggle against unjust dictates that barred inclusion, promoted bias, and crafted oppression. Times have changed, though. In today’s age of social media, with money soothing our middle-class conscience, meaningful protests are mostly unheard of. And even when there are one or two, they are muted and often handled with the swiftest dexterity.

of the apartheid regime and set the stage for the end of apartheid. Now, June 16 is celebrated as National Youth Day in South Africa.

On July 9, 1999, at 8:30am in Tehran, students were attacked by security forces members, riot police and a paramilitary mob under the orders of a local police chief. Five were killed, a couple thrown off the balconies. The reformist president was enraged while the clerics and conservatives in the judiciary acted otherwise. The six days of demonstrations ended in violence. A state of emergency was declared. The nation was made to turn to “Anti America” positioning while students mysteriously disappeared. Then came the 2002 unrest following the announcement of a reformist lecturer, Hashem Aghajari, being condemned to death for apostasy, after which came 2009, with the images of 27-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan being shot dead going viral.

threats while students affiliated with protesting groups have faced threats and doxxing attacks.

In protest, an Israeli billionaire and his wife are stepping down from the executive board of Kennedy School, as they considered Gay’s message to be an unbecoming, lukewarm response.

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On December 10, 1957, the second-youngest recipient of the



PHOTO: REUTERS

Protesters in Paris hold Palestinian flags and placards during a demonstration in support of the people of Gaza.

pads, literally obliterated, finally made it to the Museum of Modern Art.

In 2017, there was jazz in Washington Square Park to mourn the death of the American presidency. Around 11:45am, costumed protesters stood beneath Washington Square Arch, dressed in black. They carried upside-down US flags. A few historical figures accompanied them, by the side of a black coffin with a Presidential seal reading, “The American presidency: April 30, 1789 to January 20, 2017.” “Abe Lincoln” wore a mourning coat, and next to him stood Lady Liberty in black and white while Lady Justice carried money on her scales.

In contrast, traditional protests, mostly led by students, have impacted history. Students have always been the first to engage in discourses on divisive borders with imagined,

Families then were only allowed to mourn in silence, while security and intelligence forces continued to identify, surveil and arrest. Yet, today, the Gen Z who don’t bear the historical burden of the eight-year-long war with Iraq continue to defy and risk their lives in protest against headscarves, even lighting bonfires using them.

In Pakistan, where honour killings were rampant and acid attacks were common, where rape within a marriage was only a faint issue till 2007, students protested and risked being beaten. General Musharraf paid lip service while women were getting kidnapped for wearing modern clothing and being forced to confess their so-called sins.

On May 15, 2001, students at the University of Jordan marched on the annual anniversary of *Al Nakba* (“the catastrophe”), a day in 1948 on which

Nobel Prize in Literature was living in war-torn Algeria. Prior to that, in February 1956, he had resigned from editorship at *L’Express* and subjected himself to a public silence about the conflict, after having failed to negotiate a civilian truce. In defence of his silence, philosopher, writer, and political activist Albert Camus wrote, “When speech can lead to the remorseless disposal of other people’s lives... silence is not a negative position.”

In his most famous novel *Le stranger*, his main character, Meursault, is condemned to death as he, too, refuses to speak when confronted by the norms of the French legal system and its society.

Considering the times that we are living in, perhaps, in between now and till all our daughters and granddaughters glorify protests, it’s best for us to die the Meursault way?