

HOW PAKISTAN SAW 1971

Inside the Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report

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Imagine poring over a confidential war report that warns of unreliable data, only to find it quietly accepting the lowest figures possible. That is exactly the puzzle at the heart of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission's report on the 1971 War, an official inquiry set up by Pakistan after its defeat to investigate the military and political failures in East Pakistan. Early in the document, on page 32, the Commission acknowledges the fog of war: "it was hardly possible to obtain an accurate estimate of the toll of death and destruction". In other words, precise numbers were unknowable. Yet, in the very next chapter, it confidently defers to the army's own low-end estimate: "approximately 26,000" killed in 1971. Citing a "lack of any other reliable data", it declares that this figure, provided by GHQ (the General Headquarters of the Pakistan Army), is "reasonably correct".

The report warns us not to trust every testimony, yet then relies on those very accounts to apportion blame. In one striking passage, the Commission says it found evidence of "concerted efforts" by senior officers to give a "consistent, if not necessarily accurate, account" of events. In layman's terms, the generals were coordinating each other's stories in captivity. It even recounts how Lt Gen A. A. K. Niazi, while a prisoner of war, "persuade[d]... his subordinate commanders" by "threats and inducements" to present a uniform narrative that would deflect blame.

Yet, after documenting this collusion, the Commission turns around and uses those same synchronised testimonies to condemn top leaders. It bluntly assigns "final and overall responsibility" for the defeat to Yahya Khan and a handful of his generals (Pirzada, Umar, Mitha). In other words, it cautions, "these accounts may be rigged", then says, "we trust them completely for our verdict". This is a classic self-contradiction. If all high-ranking officers supposedly rehearsed their stories, logic demands scepticism. Ayesha Jalal, writing on that era, notes the deeper problem: the inquiry had no contemporaneous records at all—no minutes were kept", she writes, "making it impossible to cross-check and verify" what Yahya or Bhutto told the Commission. Both Jalal and the report itself hint that the evidence base was shaky from the start. But the Commission refuses to adjust its conclusions for that weakness, effectively trusting a web of convenient falsehoods.

Framing the "proper perspective"
Very early on, the report tries to set the scene by pointing out violent incidents caused by Bengali nationalists, presumably to argue that the army was fighting a two-sided conflict. In one passage, it reminds us that before the crackdown in March 1971, rebel fighters and Indian-backed infiltrators "continued to indulge in killings, rape and arson" in East Pakistan. It reads like a pre-emptive justification: "See, even the Awami League cadres were violent, so Pakistani forces responded in kind."

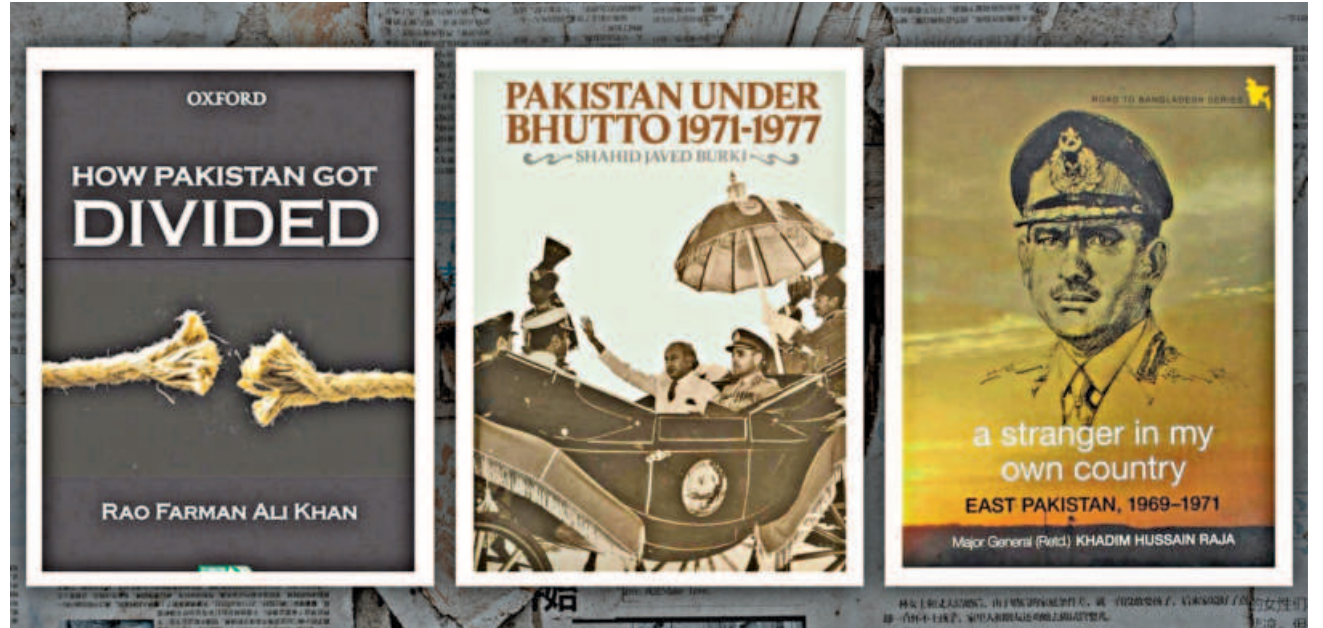
This framing shifts initial blame onto Bengali "miscreants", a narrative device the report calls giving the "proper

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perspective". But the Commission's own later findings unravel that framing. When it finally tallies the evidence, the report admits plainly that Pakistani forces did commit massive "excesses" against civilians. Paragraph 38 concedes that "there is substance in the allegations that... excesses were indeed committed on the people of East Pakistan". It even insists that, "irrespective of the magnitude" of those atrocities, punishments are warranted. In short, the army's crimes were real and undeniable, which contradicts any notion that this was merely a tit-for-tat firefight.

To put that in context, US diplomats at the time were themselves horrified. A March 1971 telegram from American officers in Dhaka complained that while relief was sent for cyclone victims, world powers "condone[d] indiscriminate killing" of the same Bengali population by "an essentially alien army". The Commission may have been reluctant to use the word "genocide", but the message was clear: Bengali civilians were singled out for slaughter. Thus, the report's early attempt to blame the Awami League ends up sounding hollow. The narrative arc becomes: "They fired first" → "Our troops retaliated" → "No, wait, our troops also went too far." The inconsistent framing suggests that the Commission was torn between nationalistic pressures and the legal necessity to acknowledge crimes.

Discipline and decay at the top
Behind the scenes of the report is another tension: on the one hand, it portrays Pakistan's army as disciplined by orders; on the other, it depicts a command structure rotting from within. Officially, the text boasts that generals repeatedly warned soldiers to "refrain from acts of violence and immorality". It even credits Lt Gen Tikka



Pakistani memoirs and testimonies expose a fractured command structure, where collusion, denial, and shifting blame defined the military's conduct during the 1971 war.

Khan with taking complaints seriously; when told of abuse, he would "redress grievances and take disciplinary action". On paper, discipline was maintained.

But the more ominous side emerges elsewhere. The report hints at a senior leadership in moral freefall. It notes that "wine and women" were rampant among officers and describes how some top leaders gave what was essentially a green light to violence. A chilling example is the testimony that Lt Gen Niazi personally encouraged men to kill and rape Bengalis. The report explicitly says that Niazi's own words and actions "were calculated to encourage the killings and rape".

These stories undercut the disciplined narrative. They suggest that even as commanders ordered decency, their private instructions promoted brutality. The Commission does not highlight this clash sufficiently. Instead, it leaves us to stitch it together ourselves: one paragraph stresses that generals warned their troops against violence, and the next implies that those very generals were stoking the fires. It is as if someone wrote two conflicting plotlines on facing pages and walked away.

From the reader's angle, this means that the veneer of order is an illusion. When senior officers were on the sidelines enjoying revelry, field units acted with impunity. One telling passage records ordinary officers casually using "Bangladesh" as code for a one-way trip to death—a grim wink that checks and balances no longer applied. In the end, the Commission's formal emphasis on discipline rings hollow next to such accounts of the command climate collapsing.

The "Bangladesh" code word: Justice evaporates

One of the most striking pieces of



Justice Hamoodur Rehman presenting the report to Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, 1972.

evidence is the testimony about "Bangladesh" itself. Officers told the Commission that when a suspected Bengali was "being sent to Bangladesh", it was code that he would never come back. To quote directly: "being sent to Bangladesh — a code name for death without trial, without detailed investigations and without any written order by any authorised authority". This single line says it all: inside the army, "Bangladesh" did not mean exile or transfer—it meant summary execution.

Yet the Commission seems almost embarrassed by this fact. In its section on responsibility, Para 35, it states blandly that "there is nothing to show" the top brass ever planned atrocities. The contrast is jarring. On the one hand, subordinates testify to a chilling coded

execution policy; on the other, the report insists no formal policy existed. It is a classic "plausible deniability" manoeuvre. By focusing on the lack of explicit written orders or plans, the Commission effectively distances generals from guilt. But, of course, the testimonies indicate that no formal paperwork was needed—the code word and the atmosphere were orders enough.

This contradiction strikes at the heart of accountability. If there were truly no orders for brutality, one must ask: how did so many officers learn that "Bangladesh" meant murder? The report's silence on this gap is deafening. It quietly acknowledges that real atrocities took place, yet stops short of calling them intentional acts by commanders. In literary terms, it is as if the investigator says, "Our spy reports are questionable", then proceeds to rely on them. The code word story is credible and horrifying, but the conclusion is muted.

Admitted atrocities vs. rhetorical minimisation

The Commission's tone shifts like a pendulum whenever it describes atrocities. At times, it almost sounds like a human rights report: it laments that "excesses were indeed committed" and insists on punishment "irrespective of the magnitude". This phrasing resembles what one might find in an international tribunal—acknowledging suffering first, then addressing it. But immediately afterwards, the language flips back to damage control. The report chides the Bangladesh claims as "highly coloured and exaggerated", even suggesting that some incidents "did not, in fact, take place" at all.

This double-voice strategy serves to mollify opposing audiences. Legally and morally, the Commission must admit that atrocities happened. Politically, it must not alienate its own military and public. The result is an inconsistent narrative: a formal concession of guilt coexists with veiled accusations of fabrication.

Responsibility at the top vs. accountability on the ground

In the final reckoning, who is blamed and how? The Commission is careful to point fingers upwards in a political sense. It states clearly that ultimate responsibility lies with President Yahya Khan and a few of his generals. Their "final and overall responsibility" is on the record. Yet, at the same time, the legal language around intent is conspicuously hedged.

Most operational blame is quietly shifted downwards. The report notes that it was junior officers and soldiers who physically committed the murders, often disobeying discipline. By blaming "undisciplined" troops and local "excesses", the higher-ups save face. The division of blame becomes: top brass erred in judgement; bottom rung men erred in action.

This effectively admits a kind of moral responsibility for the generals, but not clear legal culpability. It is akin to a modern dictator saying, "My subordinates were corrupt." The language allows the report to claim it is prosecuting the leaders politically, while leaving room to doubt whether they actually planned each atrocity. In fact, the Commission did recommend trials for these officers, but those recommendations were never acted upon. The military establishment simply shelved the report. The net effect is a curious hybrid: "We're guilty, but not guilty in a court."

International reactions and the forgotten inquiry

Even as the Commission wrestled with its conscience, the outside world had

little doubt about what happened in East Pakistan. International newspapers and diplomats in 1971 used terms like "genocide" and "reign of terror" to describe the Pakistani crackdown. The US State Department's own records show diplomats decrying the massacre of civilians by what they called an "essentially alien army". The Commission, however, seems embarrassed that the world saw through the Pakistani narrative.

Ironically, it chastises Pakistan's leaders for allowing foreign scrutiny, for example by sending delegations to the UN, as if that hurt the regime's image.

After all was said and done, one wonders what real impact the Commission's report had on Pakistan. The answer is: none. Successive governments suppressed it. Decades later, only a few sections have been leaked to the press. Meanwhile, many of the generals and officials it lambasted went on to hold high office, as if nothing had been said.

A corroboration ledger: What holds up?

Let us take stock of what we can trust in this story: the report does admit that atrocities happened and that there is evidence of coordinated cover-ups. Historians and victims alike confirm that much abuse took place. Its legal findings that Yahya Khan and his generals failed their nation are supported by external analyses of the political context of 1971. Its own contributors acknowledge that the official Pakistani figures are low.

But the report's numbers and absolutions do not hold up under scrutiny: it knowingly adopts the lowest casualty count even as surveys point to 269,000. It discounts hundreds of thousands of rapes based on scant data, ignoring overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It records that "Bangladesh" meant execution, then downplays what that implies about command responsibility.

In the end, the Hamoodur Rehman Commission is most reliable when it indicts Pakistan's own system (moral failures, impunity) and least reliable when it tries to preserve that system (counts and blame). The raw evidence—survey numbers, victim testimonies, international witness accounts—emphatically favours the former interpretation.

The story of the Commission thus reads as a cautionary tale: an inquiry meant to seek truth, but constrained by politics and self-protection. It tells us exactly what Pakistani power-brokers were willing to admit: that things went horribly wrong in 1971. But it quietly omits any claim that those leaders acted with deliberate evil intent. For readers today, the takeaway is to read between the lines. Take the parts where the Commission embraces the guilt (mass killings, prison testimony, chain of command failures) at face value. Treat its conveniently "conservative" conclusions (low death counts, absolution of top intent) with scepticism.

In short, follow the evidence, not the apologies. The Hamoodur report opens a window to 1971, but it closes many others with a self-serving spin. By comparing its claims to independent data and context, we confirm that Pakistan's army committed far more horrors than this report will fully acknowledge.

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PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDER/DRK

Bodies of martyred intellectuals with hands and faces bound [Rayerbazar, Dhaka, December 18, 1971].

Think about that: the report admitted uncertainty, then chose the smallest plausible number anyway. It even dismisses higher counts as exaggeration. Bangladeshi leaders' claims of 3 million deaths and 200,000 rapes are summarily labelled "highly exaggerated", without presenting counter-evidence. This sleight of hand matters because independent research paints a far grimmer picture. A 2008 analysis of World Health Survey data found about 269,000 violent war deaths in Bangladesh (95% confidence interval: 125,000–505,000). In plain terms, that is roughly ten times the Commission's number. The survey even noted that Pakistan's own casualty reports captured only about one-third of actual deaths. By comparison, the Commission's 26,000 is an extreme outlier, aligning with the lowest estimates anywhere.

The contrast is even starker on sexual violence. The report flatly rejects the allegation of "200,000 rapes" by citing a British "abortion team" that allegedly handled only 100 cases. But, as scholars note, counting abortions grossly underestimates rape: not every victim becomes pregnant, and many pregnancies (and abortions) go unreported in such chaos. In fact, historians widely agree that the Pakistani military's campaign involved systematic mass rape—hundreds of thousands of women—an episode that Bangladesh later also described as genocidal.

Signals in the silence: Witness testimonies



A survivor of the Pakistan Army's atrocities [Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh, December 11, 1971]. PHOTOGRAPH: NAIB UDDIN AHMED