

The 'Bihari' Minorities in Bangladesh: Victims of Nationalisms

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Successive governments of Bangladesh, along with the vast majority of Bangladeshis, have consistently denied the existence of any discrimination against the ethnic, religious or linguistic minority groups living in the country. The case of the 'Biharis' in Bangladesh is different from the other minority groups. In the first place the average Bangladeshi does not accept them as members of a minority of citizen status, let alone agree with the view that the 'Biharis' were (or are) ever discriminated against or victimized. Bangladeshi intellectuals, politicians, businessmen and others argue that

- (a) the 'Biharis' in general collaborated with the Pakistani occupation army during the Liberation War in 1971 and were responsible for the killing of thousands of Bangladeshis
- (b) they are nothing short of 'war-criminals', and
- (c) are 'stranded Pakistanis', who should be sent back to Pakistan.

One is not likely to hear from them that just a handful of 'Biharis' actively collaborated with the Pakistanis in 1971 (as did many Bengali Muslims), and that is no justification for treating about a quarter million of them as pariahs, crowding them into unhygienic 'refugee camps' in Dhaka and elsewhere. Few Bangladeshis talk about thousands of innocent 'Bihari' men, women and children being killed during and after the war by Bengali 'freedom-fighters' and others, or about hundreds of thousands of them losing their properties in the wake of the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

Many Bangladeshi Muslims would argue that (a) Bangladesh is a secular country although Islam was declared as the 'state religion' in 1988; (b) communal rioting and discrimination on the basis of race,

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religion and language are matters of the past, prevalent only during the colonial and Pakistani periods; (c) Bengali Muslims are different from fellow-Bengalis or Muslims elsewhere in South Asia in that they are mild, gentle and non-communal by nature; (d) people in Bangladesh live in peace and harmony with their neighbours; and (e) that the creation of Bangladesh signalled the death-knell of 'communal' forces.

The imposition of a ban on Islam-oriented political parties by the government in 1972 may also be cited to highlight the secular nature of the polity. The subsequent lifting of the ban on parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami and Muslim League by the military government of General Ziaur Rahman (1975-81), may also be cited by some as a step taken in the opposite direction. The adherents of such views impute communal behaviour and anti-Hindu incidents of loot and arson in Bangladesh in the early 1990s to the unhindered political activities of the Islam-oriented groups, implying, most apologetically, that only the Islamists are communal (anti-Hindu) but all other Bangladeshi Muslims are free from the virus.¹

What is even more interesting is that although some Bangladeshi Muslim intellectuals would agree with the view that Bangladeshi Hindus (about 10 per cent of the total population) in general enjoy second-class status in almost every sphere of life, very few would accept that tribal groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been living in a much more difficult situation than the Hindus. Only a handful of Bangladeshi Muslims would agree with various international human rights groups and individuals who have documented incidents of mass-murder, rape, looting and arson, committed by both Bangladeshi security forces and civilians against the Chakma and other ethnically non-Bengali minority groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts since 1972. A recent book by a Bangladeshi intellectual and a former minister under the Ershad regime (overthrown in December 1990 by the people) is not only defensive about Bengalis but also portrays tribesmen as outlaws and killers. A minister of the Khalida Zia government has also been very critical of them, denying them any right of autonomy or separate identity.² It is equally interesting that those intellectuals, politicians and others who are critical of Islamic

¹ See for details Shahriar Kabir, *Bangladeshe Samprodaikotar Chalchitra* (Bengali) (Dhaka, 1993); Mahmudur Rahman Manna, *Samprodaikota O jamaat* (Bengali) (Dhaka, 1993); and Taslima Nasreen, *Lajja* (Bengali) (Dhaka, 1993), passim.

² Mizanur Rahman Shelley (ed.), *The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh: The*

groups like the Jamaat-i-Islami and Muslim League are hardly critical of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 'the Father of the Nation' (who advised the tribes to become 'Bengalis') for denying the tribes rights to retain their culture, language and separate ethnic entity.

This paper aims at exploring the reasons why the 'Bihari', Urdu speaking Muslim refugees from India, who migrated to East Pakistan in the wake of the Partition of 1947, were not assimilated into the mainstream and why and how Bengali Muslims persecuted and exploited them. This is an attempt to understand why and how nationalist movements, especially in the 'Third World', breed chauvinism, and to show how the bulk of the 'Bihari' refugees were misguided by their West Pakistani patrons and their local non-Bengali agents, alienating them from the bulk of the Bengali population in East Pakistan. Later, during and after the civil war of 1971, this alienation was far more pronounced. In short, the 'Biharis' have been the victims of two divergent streams of nationalism – the Pakistani from 1947 to 1971, and the Bengali/Bangladeshi from 1971 to the present.

The origin of the problem lies in the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Prior to this Muslims had constituted a minority of four million out of nearly thirty million of the total population of Bihar. The large-scale exodus of Muslims from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal started in the wake of the massacre of thousands of them in Bihar and Calcutta in late 1946 and in 1947 and 1950 by Hindu and Sikh extremists. The Great Bihar Killings of October-November 1946, preceded by the Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946, alone led to the extermination of about thirty thousand Muslims. Consequently more than a million Bihari Muslims sought refuge in East Bengal after Partition. Another thirty thousand entered East Bengal from other parts of eastern India, especially eastern Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. They were followed by more migrants from eastern India after the communal riots of 1950 and 1964. Since the majority of these Muslim refugees were Bihari Muslims from Bihar and Calcutta, all of them were collectively known as 'Biharis' in East Bengal or East Pakistan.³

Untold Story (Dhaka, 1992), pp. 168-77; Oli Ahmad's (Minister of Communications, Government of Bangladesh) interview with the BBC Television, 31 May 1995.

³Minority Rights Group, 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', Report no. 11, 4th edn. (London, 1982), p. 8.

By 1971 their numbers had swollen to more than 1.5 million and often they were subsumed under the broad category of 'non-Bengalis' which included various refugee groups from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat and other parts of north-western India. There were a few West Pakistani businessmen, pedlars, moneylenders and security guards (mostly Pathans) throughout East Pakistan.

When the bulk of the 'Bihari' refugees arrived in East Pakistan there was no land for them. Not being peasant or agricultural workers, they settled in urban and semi-urban centres. Many were self-employed small traders and mechanics, while others were government officials and clerks, teachers and professionals and skilled workers on the railways and in the mills and factories. By the early 1960s most of them were provided with cheap housing in the refugee colonies of Dhaka (Mirpur and Muhammadpur), Chittagong, Syedpur, Rangpur and elsewhere in northern and western East Pakistan. The well-to-do section of the 'Biharis' lived in private residential areas in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet and other big towns.⁴

During the early days of the Pakistani government programme for refugee rehabilitation in East Pakistan, the local Bengali population did not resent the arrival of displaced 'Biharis'. They were welcomed as fellow-Pakistanis, who had suffered and sacrificed for the attainment of Pakistan. Up to the early 1950s the bulk of the East Pakistani Muslim middle and lower middle classes were in a state of euphoria, created by their birth of Pakistan.

By 1951, a large number of Hindu professionals, clerks and petty officials, landlords and businessmen had emigrated to India. The East Bengali Muslims grabbed the vacant positions and 'abandoned enemy properties' left behind in the urban and rural areas. They regarded the 'Bihari' refugees as comrades-in-arms. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who later created Bangladesh, is said to have brought many Bihari Muslims over to East Pakistan in the wake of the Partition of 1947 by touring around Bihar, urging them to migrate to East Bengal.⁵

The Pakistani Government for quite some time succeeded in portraying the 'Biharis' as the *muhajirin* of Pakistan. Although the

⁴ See Map-Source, ibid.

⁵ Maulana Bhashani (1880-1976), one of the political gurus of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is said to have told this to Basant Chatterjee. See Basant Chatterjee, *Inside Bangladesh Today: An Eyewitness Account* (New Delhi, 1973), p. 85

term literally means refugees, it has a much deeper religious connotation. Prophet Mohammad and his early followers from Mecca who emigrated to Medina were also known as the *muhajirin*, who received the support and protection of Medina's Muslims or *ansars*. Similarly, Pakistani ruling elites, a few of them represented in East Bengal as well, might have adopted the term *muhajirin* with a view to making East Bengali Muslims duty-bound to help and accept them as their own people. This scheme worked for some time and not simply because of government machinations. To understand why the average Bengali Muslim did not resent the presence of the 'Biharis', one must understand how desperate he was to overthrow Hindu hegemony represented by the *zamindar-mahajan-bhadralok* (landlord-moneylender-middle class), especially during the four decades up to 1947.⁶

However, the honeymoon was short-lived. M.A. Jinnah's speech in Dhaka in March 1948, stressing that 'Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan' caused widespread consternation. To the surprise and dismay of most East Bengali Muslims, who had unflinching faith in Pakistan, Jinnah also declared that anyone opposed to Urdu as the 'state language' was an enemy of Pakistan.⁷

What a handful of Bengali intellectuals and politicians realized not long after the creation of Pakistan – that East Bengal had virtually become a colony of the western wing – was soon realized by many due to the speech of Jinnah of March 1948 and a chain of events and political developments that highlighted the preponderance of 'non-Bengalis' in important sectors of administration. The Urdu speaking East Bengali Prime Minister, Khawaja Nazimuddin, further enraged East Bengali intellectuals, students, politicians and others by unwittingly favouring Urdu as the 'state language' in January 1952.⁸

Thereafter the eastern and the western wings of Pakistan gradually drifted apart. The West Pakistani civil and military rulers, the bureaucracy (mostly manned by 'non-Bengalis') with its colonial

⁶Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947* (Boulder, 1992), passim.

⁷Badruddin Umar, *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon O Tatkalin Rajinoti*, vol. 1 (Bengali) (Dhaka, 1970), pp. 104-22; Keith Callard, *Pakistan: Political Study* (London, 1957), p. 182.

⁸Kamruddin Ahmad, *The Social History of East Pakistan* (Dhaka, 1967), pp. 124-5

structure and mentality, 'non-Bengali' business interests and other 'non-Bengalis' living in East and West Pakistan aided the process of disintegration. West Pakistanis behaved as if they, as members of a racially and intellectually superior race, had the divine mandate to rule East Pakistan. The upper echelons of the 'Biharis' in East Pakistan, as junior partners of West Pakistani business groups, believed that their existence and continued prosperity in East Pakistan depended on the goodwill of the Pakistani ruling and business elites. Consequently, they also joined the anti-East Pakistani and pro-West Pakistani stream, mobilizing the half-educated or illiterate, poorer working class sections of the 'Biharis' against their Bengali neighbours, thus forsaking the economic and political interests of their adopted home. On several occasions, 'Bihari' mill workers at Narayanganj, Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong took part in anti-Bengali communal riots whipped up by their Pakistani masters in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹

The Pakistani ruling and business elites successfully hegemonized the 'Bihari' mass consciousness by distributing a few favours – jobs in mills and factories, railways and postal departments and cheap housing in several 'refugee colonies' in Dhaka and elsewhere in the province, concentrating them in ghettos and isolating them from the Bengalis. Pakistani elites and their Urdu-speaking junior partners in East Pakistan exploited 'Bihari' loyalty to Pakistan,¹⁰ regarded by many as their 'promised land'. They often regarded them as 'semi Hindus', pro-Indian and disloyal to Pakistan.¹¹

Most 'Biharis' believed that as Urdu-speakers they were not only better Pakistanis than their Bengali neighbours but were also racially superior. They regarded themselves important partners of the Punjabi-Urdu-speaking oligarchy of Pakistan and accepted the West Pakistani ruling and business elites as their sole patrons, guides and protectors. They had neither any representative in the Provincial or Central Legislatures nor any leader to promote understanding between themselves and their perceived 'friends' and 'foes', West Pakistanis and Bengalis, respectively. Consequently they failed to understand that the Pakistani rulers were using them by alienating them from the indigenous population as European colonists had used Asian migrants

⁹ Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajinitir Panchash Bachhar* (Bengali) (Dhaka, 1970), p. 335; Kamruddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-7.

¹⁰ Basant Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-3.

¹¹ Kamruddin Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

against indigenous people in Africa.¹² Some scholars compare them with enterprising Jewish minorities, who 'succeeded through hard work induced by their feeling of insecurity'.¹³ However, from their extra-territoriality and almost total indifference to the development and welfare of East Pakistan, it seems they had more similarities with Asian migrants in colonial Africa than with hardworking and intelligent Jews of Europe and America. Consequently, not long after the 'Biharis' had settled in different urban areas of East Bengal, their anti-Bengali attitude and sudden prosperity (both due to hard work and government patronage) soon turned them into the most undesirable elements or 'parasites of East Bengal' in the eyes of many Bengali intellectuals, traders, workers and professionals.

By the late 1960s when most East Pakistanis started demanding more autonomy for their province, some 'Biharis' openly sided with the quasi-military regime of President Ayub Khan. In contrast most 'Biharis' and Indian migrants in Karachi openly defied Ayub Khan, demanding more rights and opportunities for Karachi: unlike the 'Biharis' in East Pakistan, Indian refugees in Karachi had leaders from within their own community who did not want to compromise with the central government at the expense of the interests of their adopted home, Karachi.

In East Pakistan, the arrest of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other Bengali nationalist politicians in 1966 led to widespread violence and many Bengali students, intellectuals and politicians raised the cry for an independent state. By early 1969, due to the concerted efforts of all the leading opposition parties of both East and West Pakistan, President Ayub Khan relinquished power. The mass upsurge of 1969 also led to the release of many political prisoners, including the Awami League (People's League) leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his 'co-conspirators'. Soon, the militant, pro-independence 'leftist' sections of the pro-Awami League student and youth organization began to raise slogans demanding total independence for East Bengal. *Jai Bangla* (Victory to Bengal) was one such slogan.

Other slogans were far more provocative. By late 1970 and early 1971, the Dhaka University campus was reverberant with

¹² 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', p. 8.

¹³ Ibid.

Ekta-duita maura dharo
Sakal-bikal nashta karo

Catch one or two maura [non-Bengalis]
 Every morning and evening and eat them up.

Graffiti proclaiming Bengalis as the 'most superior race in the world' (*Bangali bishwer srestho jatt*) started appearing in the universities by early 1970.

II

By the time of the December 1970 parliamentary elections, anti-'non-Bengali' feeling was whipped up to such an extent throughout East Pakistan that attacks on 'non-Bengali' shops and properties by Bengali mobs were quite common in Dhaka and Chittagong. The day (1 March 1971) President Yahya Khan announced his decision to prorogue the impending parliamentary session, Bengali mobs in big cities, especially Dhaka and Chittagong, targeted 'non-Bengali' homes and establishments. These attacks continued unabated, especially in the peripheral districts, until Pakistani control was reestablished between late March and late April 1971. Thousands of 'Bihari' men, women and children were killed. In many places, especially in the northern and south-western districts, thousands of 'Biharis' were burnt alive or simply hacked into pieces by Bengali marauders.¹⁴

After the liberation of Bangladesh on 16 December 1971, and in some cases after the liberation of certain districts even earlier, more 'Biharis' fell victim, to the terror let loose by genuine and pseudo-Bengali freedom-fighters. Many 'Bihari' and Bengali collaborators of the Pakistani armed forces during the Liberation War of 1971 were gunned down during December 1971 and early 1972. Unlike the Bengali collaborators the 'Biharis', whether they collaborated or not, faced the wrath of Bengali freedom fighters and supporters/workers of the Awami League twice – once before the Pakistani crackdown on 25 March 1971 and later when they were charged with collaboration. However, most managed to survive either by handing over their entire properties – houses, shops, cars, cash and jewelleryes – to the mobs, or through the direct intervention of the Indian army and Border Security

¹⁴ Lawrence Ziring, *Bangladesh from Mujib to Ershad: An Interpretive Study* (Dhaka, 1992), p. 65; Qutubuddin Aziz, *Blood and Tears* (Karachi, 1974), passim.

Force in the wake of the Liberation.

According to a report of the London-based Minority Rights Group, over 300 'Biharis' were killed by 'extremist mobs' at Chittagong in early March 1971, and at Jessore, Khulna, Rangpur, Saidpur and Mymensingh. Some estimate that several thousand 'Biharis' were killed prior to the Pakistani army's ruthless intervention on 25 March 1971 and that further reprisals against them followed when Yahya Khan arrested Sheikh Mujib and outlawed the Awami League.¹⁵ However the non-Bengali version of the story does not tell us how 'Bihari' marauders persecuted Bengalis under the protection of Pakistani authorities during April and December 1971.

The following account by Anthony Mascarenhas, author of *The Rape of Bangla Desh*, highlights the plight of the 'Biharis' as well:

Thousands of families of unfortunate Muslims, many of them refugees from Bihar,... were mercilessly wiped out. Women were raped or had their breasts torn out with specially fashioned knives. Children did not escape the horror: the lucky ones were killed with their parents; but many thousands of others must go through what life remains for them with eyes gauged out and limbs roughly amputated. More than 20,000 bodies of the non-Bengalis have been found in the main towns such as Chittagong, Khulna and Jessore. The real toll, I was told everywhere in East Bengal, may have been as high as 100,000; for thousands of non-Bengalis have vanished without a trace.¹⁶

In another report sent from East Pakistan *The Sunday Times* of London, gave similar information about 'the brutal massacre of thousands of non-Bengalis – men, women and children' at the hands of Bengalis, holding that 'more than 20,000 bodies have been found.... in Bengal's main towns but the final count could top 100,000.'¹⁷

In the light of scores of eyewitness accounts of the civil war in East Bengal in 1971 and the subsequent Liberation War (from 25 March to 16 December), it is no longer possible to argue that the assault on innocent civilians was a one-sided affair – Pakistanis and 'Biharis' victimizing Bengalis – and that the Bengalis retaliated only after the 'Biharis' had taken part in persecuting them in the wake of the Pakistani crackdown on 25 March.

¹⁵ 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', pp. 8-9; Kazi Anwarul Huque, *Under Three Flags; Reminiscences of a Public Servant* (Dhaka, 1986), p. 569.

¹⁶ *Sunday Times* (London), 13 June 1971.

¹⁷ *Sunday Times*, 2 May 1971.

Malcom Browne of the *New York Times* reported from Chittagong in May 1971, that before the arrival of Pakistani troops 'when Chittagong was still governed by the secessionist Awami League and its allies, Bengali workers, apparently resentful of the relative prosperity of Bihari immigrants from India, are said to have killed the Biharis in large numbers'.¹⁸ The same reporter in another report from Khulna in early May narrated how thousands of 'non-Bengalis' were butchered by Bengalis, tied to frames specially set up 'to hold prisoners for decapitation'.¹⁹ *The Times* of London cites a British technician who said that 'hundreds of non-Bengali Muslims have died in the north-western town of Dinajpur alone'.²⁰ From a memorandum submitted to the British Parliamentary delegation in Dhaka by Diwan Wirasat Hussain, a 'non-Bengali' leader of the East Pakistan Refugee Association on 20 June 1971, it appears that out of more than 50,000 Muslim refugees of Dinajpur 'barely 150 survived the March-April 1971 [prior to the arrival of Pakistani troops] massacre of non-Bengalis'.²¹ Other eyewitness accounts corroborate this.²² Scores of other Western media reports substantiate the assertion that thousands of 'Biharis' were killed in different districts of East Bengal prior to the arrival of Pakistani troops.²³ It is difficult to agree with Mascarenhas that the military action of West Pakistan preceded and did not follow massacres of non-Bengalis.²⁴ Not only do the testimonies of hundreds of victims contradict his assertion, but a report of the Minority Rights Group also affirms that thousands of Biharis were killed at Chittagong, Jessore, Khulna, Rangpur, Saidpur and Mymensingh in early March 1971, before the military action.²⁵

Significantly enough, the fifteen volume *History of the Freedom Movement of Bangladesh* (in Bengali) and scores of other studies are either silent about the massacre of 'Bihari' civilians by members of the rebel Bengali troops and civilians or else defensive about Bengalis reacting to

¹⁸ New York Times, 10 May 1971.

¹⁹ Ibid., 9 May 1971.

²⁰ The Times, 6 April 1971:

²¹ Q. Aziz, op. cit., p. 121.

²² Ibid, pp. 118-21.

²³ New York Times, 7 May 1971 (cited in Q. Aziz, op. cit., pp. 183-4); I am an 'eyewitness' to how 'Bihari' businessmen and their family members were gunned down and how about 700 'Biharis' were kept in jail and later killed by Bengalis at Sirajganj town in April 1971, prior to the arrival of the Pakistani army.

²⁴ Anthony Mascarenhas, *The Rape of Bangla Desh* (Delhi, 1971), p. 119.

²⁵ 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', p. 8.

'non-Bengali' being armed by the Pakistani army. Consider the following accounts of the Bengali-Bihari encounters during the liberation war of Bangladesh given by three Bangladeshi freedom-fighters.

Rafiqul Islam (retired Major, who actively took part in the Liberation War), in *A Tale of Millions* gives a sketchy account of what happened in Chittagong on 3 March 1971 between Bengali and 'non-Bengali':

In the early hours of the day, a procession was heading towards the city centre of Chittagong raising nationalistic slogans. When the procession reached the Wireless Colony – a non-Bengali populated area of the city – some unknown persons opened fire with rifles and physically assaulted the demonstrators. The Bengali hutments in the adjacent areas were set on fire and many people were burnt alive. News of this incident spread immediately and enraged the city people. *There was serious breach of law and order. EPR [East Pakistan Rifles, para-military border security force] was called out to assist the civil administration. It was around 9 o'clock in the morning when I reached the Wireless Colony. By that time, serious rioting was reported [sic] from other non-Bengali areas of the city – Ispahani Colony, Ambagan Colony, Kulshi Colony, and Sadar Nagar [emphasis added].*²⁶

We also learn how Pakistani troops of the 20th Baluch Regiment were responsible for the deaths of several Bengali demonstrators. Of late, one Bengali journalist in a self-congratulatory style has praised his countrymen and the Government of Bangladesh for looking after thousands of 'stranded Pakistanis' living in refugee camps in Bangladesh.²⁷

What is not revealed in such accounts is how thousands of 'non-Bengalis' or 'Biharis' were killed in Chittagong alone between 3 March and 2 April 1971 from the beginning of the mass insurgency up to the reoccupation of the city by Pakistani troops. It is, however, difficult to ascertain the death toll in Chittagong. While the Government of Pakistan's White Paper on the East Pakistan Crisis (published in August 1971) estimated the 'non-Bengali' death toll to be 15,000, some eyewitness accounts mentioned the figure to be more than 50,000.²⁸

²⁶ Rafiqul Islam, *A Tale of Millions: Bangladesh Liberation War-1971* (Dhaka, 1986), p. 37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8; Obaid ul-Haq, 'Bastuharar Votadhikar, Nirbachan O Geneva Camp', *Janakantha* (Bengali Daily), 13 June 1995.

According to eyewitness reports, late in the night of 3 March, 'a violent mob, led by gun-totting Awami League storm troopers, invaded the non-Bengali settlements in the city and looted and burnt thousands of houses and hutments'. Wireless Colony and Ferozeshah Colony, along with other 'Bihari' settlements at Raufabad, Haliashahar, Dotala, Kalurghat, Hamzabad and Pahartali in Chittagong city, were attacked by Bengali civilians and rebel soldiers. The same sources also reveal that while the East Bengal Regimental Centre in Chittagong (the headquarters of Bengali troops) was the operational headquarters of the 'rebels' (freedom-fighters), 'the principal human abattoir was housed in the main town office of the Awami League'. Another eyewitness account by a Western reporter corroborates the foregoing assertion:

The events of March and April until recently remained a mystery to the outside world. Today they speak for themselves. The headquarters of outlawed Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Chittagong are still caked with blood, a grim memorial to a slaughter of Urdu-speaking Biharis by Bengalis.

In Thakurgaon, a town in northern East Pakistan which has a large non-Bengali population, the killing may have been even worse. There I saw hundreds of women crying in the streets – widows of some of the 7,000 Biharis reported to have been massacred.²⁹

To turn to the other Bengali accounts of what happened in Chittagong and other towns in 1971, we may refer to Major General Safiullah's book on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. It is noteworthy that like Major Rafiqul Islam, Safiullah was also a sector commander (a Major in 1971) during the war (chief of the Bangladesh army up to August 1975). Safiullah's account is not very different from Rafiqul Islam's. However, by portraying the 'Biharis' of Chittagong as allies of the Pakistani troops Rafiqul Islam has used the evasive expression of 'serious rioting' to misconstrue the facts, Safiullah's portrayal of the 'non-Bengalis' of Chittagong is of 'looters' and 'killers' of Bengali civilians.³⁰

Barrister Moudud Ahmed (a freedom-fighter and a well-known politician), on the other hand, offers a relatively objective account of

²⁸ Q. Aziz, op. dr., p. 48.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 48-51; Werner Adam, 'Pakistan: See for Yourself Yahya', Far Eastern Economic Review, 19 June 1971, p. 5.

³⁰ Maj. Gen. K.M. Safiullah, Bangladesh at War (Dhaka, 1989), p. 40.

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the Bengali-'Bihari' problem during 1971. He argues that the Pakistani army quietly distributed arms in the 'non-Bengali' ghettos in Mirpur and Muhammadpur in Dhaka, Pahartali (Chittagong) and Syedpur (Rangpur). He narrates that, prior to the military crack-down on 25 March, 'some non-Bengalis killed some Bengalis' with impunity and the army shot the Bengalis down when they tried to retaliate. At the same time he points out that Mujib urged the Bengalis to continue their struggle in a 'peaceful and disciplined manner', and on the other, assured the 'non-Bengalis' living in East Bengal fair treatment as 'sons of the soil', he urged Bengalis to protect the life and properties of 'every citizen whether Bengali or non-Bengali, Hindu or Muslim'. Mujib is said to have sent some top Awami League Leaders to Chittagong in early March to maintain peace in the area.³¹ What is missing in this account is that, long before the deadlock over the transfer of power to the majority party (Awami League) in early March 1971, different section of Bengali students, workers and others had already started a bitter anti-'non-Bengali' movement throughout East Pakistan.

According to Lawrence Ziring, Mujib's call to strike on 1 March 1971, 'was also taken as a call to arms and a bloody campaign of murder, arson and looting seized the province, especially the capital.... The East Pakistani Bihari community was the target.... and many of their numbers were butchered in wild orgies that the authorities [Sheikh Mujib and his party] seemed unable or unwilling to prevent.'³² Ziring also writes about the large-scale looting and burning down of 'non-Bengali' properties during 1 and 25 March, and the initial flight to India of tens of thousands. Many 'non-Bengalis' were also flown to West Pakistan in the wake of the military crackdown on 25 March.³³

Another account by Mascarenhas (who had been sympathetic to the Bengalis) of the persecution of 'Biharis' in East Pakistan reveals how the masses and their leaders, including Bengali military officers, were prejudiced against the 'Biharis'. Major Ziaur Rahman (later Lieutenant General and President of Bangladesh until his assassination in 1981), a leader of the freedom-fighters, is said to have remarked in 1971,

³¹ Moudud Ahmed, Bangladesh: Constitutional Quest/or Autonomy (Dhaka, 1991), pp.206-7.

³² Lawrence Ziring, op. cit., p. 64.

³³ Ibid., p. 65.

'Those who speak Urdu are also our enemies because they support the Pakistan army. We will crush them.'³⁴ In another episode we are told how Major Zia treated some 'Bihari' prisoners at Kalurghat in Chittagong on 28 March 1971, after his troops had brought them to him. He is said to have ordered them: 'Take the men out and shoot them'. Then, pointing to the women prisoners, he told his troops: 'You can do what you like with them'.³⁵

III

The killings of 'Biharis', were not solely motivated by the patriotism or communal frenzy of Bengali nationalists. Petty bourgeois social envy and the lumpen proletariat's proclivity to violence and anarchy were directly involved in the killings. The participation of peasants in some peripheral towns seems akin to Russian peasant involvement in the pogroms in the late nineteenth century.

As stated, the persecution of 'Biharis' did not cease with the liberation of Bangladesh in December 1971. Although only a handful of 'Biharis' had joined the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF) and other auxiliary forces (*Razakars* and *Al-Shams*) raised by the Pakistani authorities, hundreds of 'Bihari' men were captured by Bengali freedom-fighters and taken blind-fold to 'execution' by locally organized 'firing squads' on flimsy charges of collaboration with the Pakistanis and killing of Bengalis during the Liberation War. An international observer points out how 'Tiger' Kader Siddiqui, the leader of guerrilla group from Tangail district, killed several Biharis two days after the Liberation before a crowd in Dhaka Stadium, 'an act which was seen widely on television and in the world's press, but for which he has never been tried'.³⁶ Yet many Bangladeshis, since the Liberation, have been blaming 'Biharis' for the killing of several Bengali intellectuals in December 1971.³⁷ International observers have also pointed out that the 'nationalist local press' repeatedly fuelled the Bengalis' hatred of the 'Biharis', leading to the mass looting and

³⁴ Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood* (London, 1986), pp. 118-19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁶ 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 21; Carol Rose, 'Living on Hope', Newsletter, Institute of Current World Affairs, 30 June 1992, p. 6.

expropriation.³⁸ After visiting some refugee camps in Bangladesh, Basant Chatterjee observed in 1973:

Perhaps no other class of people in the world today is as ruined, economically and socially, as smitten and smashed up as the community of the former Indian refugees in Bangladesh who are known here by the general term "Bihari".... Today in Bangladesh, to be a Bihari is the worst crime.... Thousands have been discharged from service on the ground of "long absence without leave", But their salaries and funds have not yet been paid.... Many persons rejoined duty on the strength of "clearance chits" given by Awami League M.P's. But they did not return; even their bodies remained untraced.³⁹

Chatterjee asserted that 'no Bangla leader, of the ruling party or the opposition' ever took the trouble to visit the camps where the 'Biharis' lived 'not even like vermin because vermin move.... looking an them in their mat-cells, one can scarcely believe that these lumps of bone and skin can be living human beings. They all appear to be dead.' He rejected the Bangladeshi government assertion that 260,000 'Biharis' opted for Pakistani citizenship as fictitious.⁴⁰

While thousands of 'Biharis' fell victim to the wrath of Bengali nationalists during early March to late April 1971, many were actually killed or ousted from their properties by Bengalis having connections with the ruling Awami League Party. With a view to acquiring 'Bihari' properties in big towns, especially in Dhaka and Chittagong, these properties were initially decorated with Awami League banners or sign boards portraying them as Awami League or pro-Awami League student, worker or youth organization offices. Many 'Biharis' were forced by Bengalis to sign documents indicating transfer of ownership of cars, houses and shops to their names.⁴¹

Order No. 1 of 3 January 1972 (issued before the release and arrival of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Bangladesh on 10 January) stipulate that the government could take over the control and management of those industrial and commercial concerns whose owners, directors and managers had left Bangladesh or 'were not available' to control and manage the concerns or

³⁸ 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', p. 9.

³⁹ Basant Chatterjee, op. cit, pp. 102-13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 112, 115.

⁴¹ 'The Biharis in Bangladesh', pp. 9, 14, 16; Hasan Zaheer, The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nation (Dhaka, 1994), p. 431; Siddiq Salik, Witness to Surrender (Karachi, 1978), p. 212.

'could not be allowed to run them in public interest'. It empowered the new administration 'to operate bank account of the owners, the directors and managers'.⁴² Not long after this order came the Bangladesh Abandoned Property Order (also known as the President's Order No. 16) on 28 February 1972, which had a far-reaching effect. It empowered the government to dispose of 'abandoned' properties. The vagueness of the definition of 'abandoned property' was taken advantage of by the government-appointed 'administrators'. Consequently the property of many bonafide citizens of the country, living within Bangladesh, was expropriated. One prominent legal expert, Moudud Ahmed, defended the rights of some Bangladeshi citizens whose properties were brought under the broad category of 'abandoned'.⁴³ 'Almost every property of every non-local or Bihari who migrated originally from India years ago and settled and had not opted for Pakistan was taken over as abandoned property or was under the threat of being taken over. The politicians took the advantage of the miserable state of these people.' Moudud Ahmed has pointed out how local leaders of the ruling party or 'officers enjoying their patronage' took full advantage of the government order. Ghazi Gholam Mostafa (a stalwart of the ruling Awami League Party and chief of the Bangladesh Red Cross, who was also notoriously known as the 'Blanket Thief') supervised, and expropriated 'non-Bengali' industrial, commercial and residential properties in Dhaka and its suburbs at Tejgaon and Tongi.⁴⁴

Following the withdrawal of the Indian army in late January 1972, the Bangladesh Government sent soldiers to the 'Bihari' enclave at Mirpur in Dhaka who, in the name of recovering arms, killed and arrested many Biharis though the Bangladeshi press, with the sole exception of the left-wing Sunday paper, *Holiday*, remained silent.⁴⁵ The toll in Khulna alone reached 1,000 on 10 March 1972. Many more were killed by Bengali extremists after the Liberation, mainly with a view to grabbing their properties.⁴⁶ This fact was also not reported by the press.⁴⁷

⁴² Moudud Ahmed, *Bangladesh: Era of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman* (Dhaka, 1991), pp. 14-16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2 and 41, n. 20.

⁴⁵ *The Biharis in Bangladesh*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14 and 16.

⁴⁷ Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and its Aftermath* (Dhaka, 1988), pp. 93-5.

A somewhat balanced assessment of what happened during and immediately after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was made by the late Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, a Bengali politician (Foreign Minister of Pakistan in 1956) and the founder of the daily Pakistan Observer (Bangladesh Observer):

During the whole period, a large number of Bengali private citizens were killed. On the other side the Urdu speaking citizens in East Pakistan, who were considered to be Pakistanis, also suffered grievously. No real figure of the total loss of lives, has ever been collected by any authority. Some said it could exceed a hundred thousand. My guess was it might be something like 10 to 15 thousand.

Almost all the businesses and industries set up by the non-Bengalis were looted, damaged and forcibly occupied by rowdy elements. Many leading non-Bengali businessmen succeeded in leaving East Pakistan in early 1971 fearing the break-down of law and order and thereby saved their lives. Otherwise no mercy would have been shown to women and children of the Urdu-speaking citizens.

Large numbers of Bengalis suffered in the hands of non-Bengali elements in different parts of East Pakistan. I lost more than one relative in the hands of some Urdu-speaking rowdies, though they were not connected with politics.⁴⁸

The plight of the 'Biharis' of Bangladesh and those who managed to sneak into Pakistan after 1971, has been succinctly narrated in an Urdu short story by Ibrahim Jalees. To him, these people 'from the moment they are born till their last day, [they] neither want to live nor wish to die-disgusted with life and afraid of death!'⁴⁹

IV

The roots of the conflicts which divided peoples of the subcontinent in different phases – first, Hindus were separated from Muslims and then the line of separation was drawn between different ethnic and linguistic groups – are by-products of elite conflicts, and competition between unequal middle classes. Consequently, the concept of nationalism, as developed in the subcontinent during the last one hundred odd years, has been germinating conflict. In short,

⁴⁸ Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, *Memoir.* (Dhaka, 1989), pp. 322-3.

⁴⁹ Ibrahim Jalees, 'A Grave Turned Inside-out' (translated by V. Adil and A. Bhalla), Alok Bhalla (ed.), *Stories About the Partition of India*, vol. II (New Delhi, 1994), p. 141.

the Hindu-Muslim, Bengali-'Bihari' and Bengali-'Tribal' conflicts in Bangladesh are part of much larger conflicts and identity crises in the subcontinent. So far as East Bengal is concerned, the Partition of 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 have neither benefited the minorities nor resolved the problematic issues of nationalism in Bangladesh. Hindu Bengalis and 'Bihari' Muslims, along with the 'tribals', have consequently suffered most due to the changes in the political geography of the region since 1947. The persecutions have been a byproduct of peasant xenophobia, petty bourgeois greed and intolerance, class conflict and racism/communalism nurtured and exploited by ultra nationalist Bengali leaders.

However, unlike the anti-Jewish pogroms in Russia, Ukraine and Poland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the killings in Bangladesh were neither an inevitable, precipitous outcome of class conflict nor a by-product of any spontaneous 'primitive rebellion' of the peasantry. The 'Biharis' had hardly any conflicting class-interests with the peasants and the bulk of them did not represent the mythically prosperous 'non-Bengalis' in the region. Their segregation from the Bengalis in towns and small trading centres, retaining their own distinct identity, which parallels the prevalence of Jewish ghettos in Russia and Poland in the nineteenth century, alienated them from the indigenous people. By 1971 they further alienated themselves from the bulk of the Bengali population because they nursed the illusion of being part of the Punjabi civil and military ruling elites.

One needs to understand why 'these non-Bengalis, who had no other place on earth to live in except Bangladesh, put their sole reliance on the military masters of the West although in any system of government it was the Bengalis – and not the Punjabis – who were bound to enjoy the substance of power'.⁵¹ As discussed earlier, the main reason for their lack of commitment to Bangladesh, especially during the Liberation War of 1971, was because they were not sure of securing equal citizenship rights in the event of the emergence of Bangladesh. Already stigmatized as vicious, conspiring agents of exploitation long before the civil war started in March 1971 by

⁵⁰ Mafizullah Kabir, *Experiences of an Exile at Home: Life in Occupied Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1972), p. 55.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

different sections of the Bengali bourgeois and petty bourgeois classes, the 'Biharis' were victims of wild rumours about their participation in the mass-killing of Bengalis and as co-conspirators of the Pakistani military junta. Consequently under the leadership of those Bengalis who had an eye on 'Bihari' property, Bengali peasants, soldiers and other lumpen elements let loose a reign of terror.

Their acts of unbridled terror have striking similarities with those committed by Russian, Ukrainian and Polish peasants who took part in the anti-Jewish pogroms under local leadership believing their victims to be potential enemy agents – 'pro-Polish' or 'pro-German' from the Russian point of view and 'pro-Russian' from the Ukrainian and Polish points of view.⁵²

In sum, with the annihilation, mass expropriation and disclaimer of almost all the 'Biharis' of Bangladesh as citizens, they are today not longer components of the minorities in the country. They are, in a way, victims of nationalism – Pakistani as well as Bengali/Bangladeshi, and subjected to persecution and discrimination.

⁵² See for details Michael Aronson, *Troubled Waters: The Origins of the 1881; and Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia* (Pittsburgh, 1991); and John D. Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge, 1995).