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Witness Statements of Bangladesh Genocide, 1971: A Study on Sonaimuri Genocide

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ABSTRACT: Bangladesh emerged as an Independent country following the Liberation War against Pakistan in 1971. Only in a period of nine months, Pakistani army along with their local collaborators killed 3 million people, raped more than 2,00,000 women and 10 million people fled from the country and became refugees. Thus the Pakistani army carried out genocide in Bangladesh. In 1971, the Pakistani army carried out atrocious genocide in a planned way in the whole country. In particular, the paper chooses a case on Sonaimuri genocide in Noakhali district which is a remote area of Bangladesh. On 22 April, 17 May and 26 May the Pakistani army carried out genocide and killed many people at the villages of Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram in Sonaimuri Upazila. Besides killing, Pakistani army also set fire on many houses and looted many valuable things during those days. The local collaborators assisted Pakistani army in accomplishing these atrocious activities. The aim of this paper is to find out the brutality of the Pakistani army based on the information obtained from the eyewitnesses of that genocide. It would enrich the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Key Words: Bangladesh, Liberation War, Genocide, Sonaimuri, Eyewitness

I. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century is considered the era of genocides by Scholars. The definition of genocide given by the United Nations in 1949 runs as follows:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: **a.** Killing members of the group; **b.** Causing serious bodily or mental harm to the members of the group; **c.** Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; **d.** Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; **e.** Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Center for the Study of Human Rights, 1994, p 36).

Although, in 1971, the Pakistan army killed the Bengalis indiscriminately, they had some specific targets (Mascarenhas, 1971). The Bengali military men, the members of the Hindu Minority Community, the Awami Leaguers, students of colleges and universities and Bengali intellectuals were the main targets. The genocide of 1971 was deliberately planned by the Pakistani Junta. On the night of 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army launched Operation Searchlight. They took control of Dhaka and quickly spread to different parts of Bangladesh. They spread to wipe out the Bengali nation through destruction, killing, torture, persecution and oppression. The principal characteristics of the genocide in Bangladesh, as described by the International Commission of Jurists, are as follows: '[T]he indiscriminate killing of civilians, including women and children and the poorest and weakest members of the community; the attempt to exterminate or drive out of the country a large part of the Hindu population; the arrest, torture and killing of Awami League activists, students, professionals and businessmen and other potential leaders among the Bengalis; the raping of women; the destruction of villages and towns; and the looting of property. All this was done on a scale which is difficult to comprehend' (quoted by Kuper, 1981, pp 78-79).

In 1971, only in a period of nine months, the Pakistani army along with their local collaborators killed 3 million people. Scholars identified the violence of Pakistani army as brutal and inhuman, which resulted in an

enormous loss of the people of East Bengal (Saikia, 2007; Ranjan, 2016; Mookherjee, 2006). The number of women raped during liberation war is officially two hundred thousand, but this exceeds half a million by many unofficial accounts. Ten million people were driven out of their dwellings and fled to India as refugees. Journalists' reports, expatriate testimony, refugee reports and an investigation by the International Commission of Jurists in 1972 all indicate that the Pakistani army did commit genocide in Bangladesh in 1971 (Beachler, 2007). According to Mascarenhas, senior government and military officials stated: '*we are determined to cleanse East Pakistan once and for all of the threat of secession, even if it means killing off two million people and ruling the province as a colony for 30 years*' (Mascarenhas, 1971, p.117). The Pakistani army killed vast numbers of Bengalis. Villages were burned and crops destroyed. Millions of people fled to India. The destruction of homes and creation of refugees by terror undoubtedly increased the death toll. Bengali women were raped in large numbers by the occupying military. The toll of death, violence and destruction would indicate that the Pakistani army and their collaborators indeed committed genocide in Bangladesh in 1971 (Beachler, 2007).

During the liberation war in 1971, atrocious genocide took place in Noakhali district, which is a remote area of Bangladesh. Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram genocide in Sonaimuri upazila is one of those. Due to its location, Sonaimuri was important to both the freedom fighters and the Pakistani army. Pakistani army used to bring weapons to Noakhali from Comilla cantonment through Sonaimuri. The freedom fighters guarded the road which was used by the Pakistani army and fought to resist them. As the Pakistani army faced resistance in the area, they carried out genocide in these villages around the road. Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram are the villages which adjoin to the Sonaimuri railway station. On 22 April, 17 May and 26 May, the Pakistani army carried out genocide in these villages in three phases and about 126 people were martyred in these villages. We particularly limited in focusing on the genocide that happened in the Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram village during the liberation war. For better comprehension and understanding, we organize our paper in three different sections. In the first section, we discuss the methodology that we used; in the second section, we discuss the Sonaimuri genocide which includes four sub-sections- location of Sonaimuri, pre-independence political view, statements of eyewitnesses and collaborators of this genocide; in the third section, we detail our case study's findings on Sonaimuri genocide. Finally, we draw a conclusion through summing up our paper.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted through Historical, Descriptive and Analytical methods of research. This study is based on data collection from primary and secondary sources. Interviews with eyewitnesses including family members of the martyrs, freedom fighters, local, elderly people were conducted to collect primary data. Different types of documents, reminiscences, momentous reports, pictures, news and views etc. relating directly to the topic were also treated as primary sources of data. Secondary data had been collected from published books, various journals, reports published in newspapers, editorials, research works etc. Data analysis process is descriptive and qualitative in nature. All kinds of information are considered and examined analytically and cross-checked critically.

III. SONAIMURI (ALEKPARA, NAUTOLA AND BATTAGRAM) GENOCIDE

3.1 Location: Sonaimuri is a prosperous town in Noakhali district of Bangladesh. This region is rich in history, heritage, education, social, political, economic circumstances and religious harmony. Once, the present Sonaimuri upazila was a part of the greater Begumganj upazila. In 2005, it was separated from Begumganj and declared as Sonaimuri Upazila. One of the most plausible ideas about the naming of this upazila is that at one time a market called Kalirhat was established around the Sonaimuri Kalibari temple. This market was famous for Coconut, betel nut and jute. The owners of the country's top jute mills used to buy jute from this market. The jute in this market was like gold and the soil of the area and the intellectual achievements of the people were as rich as gold. And that is why this area is named by Sonaimuri (Wrapped in gold). Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram are the villages which adjoin to the Sonaimuri railway station (Interview: Faruk Faysal).

3.2 Political view: In these villages, people of the Hindu-Muslim community have lived together for hundreds of years. Most of the people of these villages make a living by farming. Although they were ordinary people, the people of these villages were politically conscious and active. They supported the Awami League. All the pre-independence movements were actively participated and led by the common people of Battagram, Nautola, Alekpara villages of Sonaimuri upazila. In the 1970 elections, the people of the area elected Rafiq Ullah Master of the Awami League by a huge margin. In 1971, when the Non-cooperation movement started in March, the ordinary students and youths of these villages also participated in the movement. When the war of liberation started, many of these villagers took part in the liberation war (Interview: Faruk Faysal)

3.3 Statements of eye witnesses: As pointed out above, Sonaimuri Upazila was then part of the Begumganj upazila. Sonaimuri which became the center point of the liberation war in 1971 has witnessed genocide, violence against women, looting and arson. Genocide that took place at Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram were the most

horrific in the history of the liberation war of greater Noakhali. Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram are compact areas. Pakistani army carried out genocide here on 22 April, 17 May and 26 May in three phases. About 126 people were martyred in these villages in this genocide.

The first genocide took place on 22 April. The Pakistani army carried out genocide at the entrance to Noakhali on this day. Pakistani forces started marching from Chittagong and Comilla to enter greater Noakhali. The freedom fighters fought with the Pakistani forces in different places. Before entering Noakhali, Pakistani army faced resistance from the freedom fighters. When Pakistani army reached Sonaimuri by train, they fired randomly at Alekpara, Battagram and Nautola villages which are near to the Sonaimuri railway station. Golam Mostafa Bhuiyan, the organizer of the local liberation war and a freedom fighter said, *'During the liberation war Pakistani army came by train from Laksham and attacked Noakhali on 22 April, 1971. Although the local freedom fighters resisted, the resistance of the freedom fighters failed as the Pakistani army had sophisticated weapons and the Pakistani army occupied the whole Noakhali including Sonaimuri. During this time, they carried out atrocities like arson, looting, torture of women and killing of innocent people in alekpara, inhabited by the minority Hindu community'* (Interview). Aminul Sheikh who is a local inhabitant of Nautola said, *'During the War of Liberation, on 22 April, 1971 the Pakistan Army arrived by train from Laksham to Noakhali. The freedom fighters fought with the Pakistani army in different places. The freedom fighters were forced to retreat in the battle as they did not have heavy weapons and Pakistani army occupied the entire area of Sonaimuri with their sophisticated weapons. At that time, the Pakistani army was firing at Battagram, Alekpara and Nautola adjacent to Sonaimuri railway station. Several people were martyred in the firing of the Pakistani army on that day. Then Pakistani army entered Noakhali and formed the Rajakar and Peace Committee with the local Muslim League. With the help of these rajakars and peace committees, the Pakistani soldiers started torturing, firing and killing Awami League leaders and minorities all over Noakhali including Sonaimuri'* (Interview).

Although the Pakistani army killed and burned indiscriminately, Hindus were one of the main targets. The Hindus were considered by the West Pakistanis as the saboteurs of Islam, agents of India and supporters of the Awami League. The Pakistani army carried out genocide on 17 May mainly for communal reasons. It was directly assisted by the local Rajakars. Among the minorities living in Alekpara and Battagram villages in Sonaimuri, Saha Bari was the most educated and wealthiest family in the area at that time. From the beginning of the liberation war, the people of the Hindu community in the area were subjected to various forms of oppression and intimidation. Following this, on 17 May 1971, genocide took place in Saha Para with the collaboration of local Rajakars. 5 people from the same house became martyred. In this genocide, Shobha Rani Saha, the wife of Shaheed Roy Mohan Saha, remembers the old days that happened 49 years ago. She said, *'They shot and killed my husband right in front of my eyes. I was hiding. My husband was a very good man. He was a well-known teacher in the area and strong in power. On May 17, Pakistanis came to my house at around 10-11 am with weapons. Hearing the sound of their coming, I hid in the hole at the back of the house with my sons and daughters. When the army shot my husband 5-6 times, he fell to the ground. The Pakistanis cut my husband's stomach with a bayonet to ensure his death. Then they set our house on fire'* (Interview). Khuku Rani Saha, a family member of the martyr in this genocide, said that, *'During the war of liberation, women from the Hindu community from many nearby houses used to take shelter in our house. The Pakistani military came to our house three more times. They set fire to our house as many times as they came. At last on the 17th May, the Pakistani military came and brutally shot and killed Roymohan Saha, Kundumohan Saha, Sudhansh Ranjan Saha, Gauri Bala Saha and Deepak Ranjan Saha. Their crime was to belong to the Hindu community'* (Interview).

The third phase of the genocide took place on May 26, 1971. The local people said that this genocide is the biggest genocide in Noakhali. This genocide was carried out by the Pakistani army in retaliation. On 25 May, 1 captain, 1 major and 4 soldiers of the Pakistan Army were killed in a battle between the Pakistani army and the freedom fighters at Bogadia. Also many were injured and several of their vehicles became useless. In view of this, the next day on May 26, the Pakistani army carried out genocide at Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram villages in Sonaimuri. About the genocide of that day the freedom fighter Gopal Chandra Shil said: *'On 25 May, by the leading of Subedar Shamsul Haq and Wali ullah the freedom fighters attacked on the way of Pakistani army at Bogadia. The road of Bogadia was stained with the blood of the Pakistani army. For the retaliation of this incident, the Pakistani army surrounded and fired on Battagram, Nautola and Alekpara the next day. Their main goal was to shoot the people of the area wherever they would find them. And that's exactly happened as they wanted. Men, women, old people and young people could not be spared that day'* (Interview).

In the genocide of that day, Chera Uddin Moulavi, an aristocrat and respected person of Battagram was martyred. At the same time, four members of their family were killed by the Pakistani army and their house was set on fire. Golam Qadir, an eyewitness to the genocide described what happened at his home. He said, *'The Pakistani army came to our house around ten in the morning. Although everyone fled in fear, my uncle Chera Uddin Moulavi and his sons stayed at home. They thought that since they belonged to an aristocratic family and were respected by all, the army would not harm them at all. But they were proved wrong. The Pakistani*

army first set fire on the Moulavi house with gunpowder. Then the Pakistani army shot and killed 4 people including CheraUddin Moulavi, Abdul Malek, Abdul Qayyum and a guest also' (Interview). On that day of the genocide, Abdul Kalam's brother and uncle were martyred. He remembered that day and said: 'I was at home that day. My brother was lying in the east corner of the room. It might be 8-9 am in the morning. I heard the sound of gunfire. Some of my family members and I took shelter in a nearby place. I could clearly see that seven or eight army came to our backyard and set fire upon our two houses. As soon as my uncle came out of the door of his house he was shot by the army. Instantaneously, he fell in the yard and was martyred there. My brother was also shot inside the house by the army. He was shot and he fell inside the room. Later the Pakistani army set fire upon the house and my brother was also burnt. We all had thatched houses. So it burnt very quickly' (Interview). Azid Mia thinks that Pakistani army set fire upon the villages in retaliation for the killing of many members of their forces in a guerrilla attack by the freedom fighters in Bogadia. This villager was an eye witness to the genocide that day. He said: 'All that day there was the sound of gunfire. Hundreds of people were running towards the bill in front of our house. I waited for a while and thought I would see what happens. Gradually, the sound of gunfire started coming towards me. My brother and I hid in a hole next to our house with a few things. Suddenly, I saw a bullet just went above my ear. Maybe Allah saved me that day. After a while, I saw some dressed army men setting fire upon our house. Some of the army had been firing randomly. My father and one of my brothers were martyred in those shots. We could not bury them immediately. When the villagers returned in the evening, they were buried' (Interview). Abul Khayer was the eye witness to the genocide that day. He lost his grandfather and uncle in that genocide. He said: 'My grandfather was a well-known person in the area. My uncle and my father knew Urdu as my grandfather did. When the Pakistanis started killing, my grandfather said to my father and uncle that- 'you two know Urdu language, so when they will come to you will explain them.' That day, the army came to our house and talked to my grandfather. At that time, my uncle was coming from the pond. He was a young man. The Pakistani army raised their guns when they saw him. My grandfather interrupted them and that's why he was shot first. Then the army shot my uncle. After that, in front of our kitchen another uncle of mine was shot and then they set the kitchen on fire. A woman used to work in our house. The woman's husband was also shot that day. But luckily he survived. Then the Swatish doctor was shot and fortunately he also survived. After the Pakistanis left, we completed the burial of my grandfather and uncle in the afternoon' (Interview). Ali Ashshab's house was at the far end of Battagram. This man in his sixties also couldn't escape from the Pakistani army that day. His son Karim Mia recalled the memory of losing his father. He said: 'Being our home at the far end of this village we thought that the armies would not come to this way. But when we saw them coming here, we all took shelter a little away from home. We repeatedly requested our father but he refused to leave the home. After a while, the army came to our house and set fire on our living room and shot and killed my father. When we returned home at noon, we saw our father's dead body lying there' (Interview).

Pakistani army killed people indiscriminately in these three villages. For the first two days 22 April and 17 May, they carried out genocide to terrorize. But the genocide of the third day on 26 May was planned. Pakistani army carried out genocide and set fire on the villages in retaliation for the killing of many members of their forces. Most of the people in these villages were the supporters of the liberation war. When the liberation war started, many of these villagers took part in the liberation war. This is one of the main reasons for the genocide carried out by Pakistani army in these villages. Local collaborators helped the Pakistani army to commit this genocide.

3.4 Collaborators of this Genocide: Pakistani army attacked, shot, set fires and looted these villages with the help of their local collaborators. Cheru Rajakar or T.K.Cheru played a major role in the anti-independence movement in this region. He was then the head of the Muslim League in Greater Begumganj. Pakistani army was happy with Cheru's work and called him 'Tamzare Khedmat' or the sword of service. However, a few more Rajakars were associated with T.K. Cheru but their names were not found (Interview: Faruk Faysal).

IV. FINDINGS

In interviewing eyewitnesses to this genocide, we found some important issues. That is:

1. The genocide took place in three stages in these villages of Sonaimuri. In the first two days, genocide was carried out in a short range on 22 April and 17 May. But on the third day of genocide, on 26 May it was done in large scale. About 126 people were martyred during these three days.
2. Due to its location, Sonaimuri was important to both the freedom fighters and the Pakistani army. Pakistani army used to bring weapons to Noakhali from Comilla cantonment through Sonaimuri. The freedom fighters tried to prevent it. Pakistani army used to come to Noakhali from Comilla through Sonaimuri. These villages are on the side of Sonaimuri Railway Station. For the first two days, they attacked, shot, set fires and looted to terrorize on their way back and forth.
3. Although the genocide of the first two days was unplanned but the genocide of the third day was planned. Since the guerrilla attack of the liberation forces made the vehicles of the Pakistani army useless and some army

including major were killed, they returned to the Begumganj Technical School on that day and started chalking out a plan. This planning was carried out a horrific genocide on the next day on 26 May as they planned.

4. The incidents of killing, torture, looting and arson in the area initially happened to the Hindu community. But later it also happened to the Muslim family.

5. In addition to the genocide in these villages, the Pakistani army set fire upon the houses of the villagers. After looting some Hindu houses in the initial stage, the Pakistani army also looted the houses of Muslims.

6. On the first two days (22 April and 17 May) of the attack in Battagram, Nautola, Alekpara, many people's houses were set on fire. As a result, people started entering India through the Feni border and became refugees.

7. Most of the martyrs of this genocide were ordinary people. None of them was involved in active politics but they were supporters of the liberation war. The martyrs were mostly the only source of income for their families. Losing their only recourse, they became helpless and disoriented. As a result, its impact on society was long lasting.

8. Although the graves of the martyrs have been preserved by the families, they have been neglected and disregarded. No initiative has been taken to preserve the memory of innumerable martyrs of the Battagram, Alekpara, Nautola. After 49 years of the liberation war, many graves have disappeared due to the lack of preservation. No memorial was erected in memory of the martyrs.

9. On 22 April, 17 May and 26 May in these three separate days genocide about 126 people were martyred. But we find only 17 names of the martyrs from the eyewitnesses. After so many years of the Independence of Bangladesh, a lot of history has been forgotten from their memory. Besides, the lack of preservation of history is another reason for losing information. Here is the list of Martyrs' names and information which we got:

The list of the Martyrs on Sonaimuri (Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram) Genocide:

No.	Name	Father's Name	Village
1.	Abdul Lokman	Bonde Ali Mia	Battagram
2.	Musa Mia	Aku Ali	Battagram
3.	Momtaz Mia	Amjad Ali	Battagram
4.	Abdul Aziz	Afta Uddin	Battagram
5.	Abdul Hakim	Afta Uddin	Battagram
6.	Loni	Nur Islam	Battagram
7.	Ashshab Ali	Ana Mia	Battagram
8.	Chera Uddin Moulavi	Not found	Battagram
9.	Abdul Khalek	Chera Uddin Moulavi	Battagram
10.	Abdul Malek	Chera Uddin Moulavi	Battagram
11.	Abdul Qayyum	Chera Uddin Moulavi	Battagram
12.	Habib Ullah	Not found	Battagram
13.	Roymohan Saha	Dwarkanath Saha	Alekpara
14.	Kundumohan Saha	Not found	Alekpara
15.	Sudhansh Ranjan Saha	Not found	Alekpara
16.	Gauri Bala Saha	Sudhansh Ranjan Saha	Alekpara
17.	Deepak Ranjan Saha	Jagananda Saha	Alekpara

V. CONCLUSION

In 1971, Bangladesh was born as an independent country following the liberation war against Pakistan. One of the most painful chapters of the liberation war of Bangladesh is genocide that was carried out by the Pakistani army. There have been so many attempts made to delete this most barbaric chapter deliberately from history. In fact, this most important chapter of the liberation war is still unknown to the new generation. Killing a group of people belonging to a religion, nationality or ethnicity has been identified as genocide. The villagers of Alekpara, Nautola and Battagram were killed indiscriminately as they were the supporters of the liberation war. The violence that the Pakistani army committed in these villages in 1971, must be called genocide because the people whom the Pakistani army killed belonged to a particular group, i. e., Bengalis seeking independence from Pakistan. Besides killing, Pakistani army committed arson and looted these villages. The genocide in Sonaimuri upazila of Noakhali district is one of such an unknown chapter in the history of Bangladesh. Although 49 years have passed since the liberation war, many genocidal places like Sonaimuri have not been identified even today. In this paper, we have tried to find out the brutality of the Pakistani army through eyewitness accounts. The genocide of Bangladesh remains unknown to the wider world. The world needs to know about the brutal genocide of Bangladesh carried out by the Pakistani army in 1971 and this paper would revealed the truth to the world about an unknown genocide which happened in a remote area of Bangladesh.

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