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The continuing rape of our history

Mashuqur Rahman demolishes Sarmila Bose's revisionist history of 1971

Genocide denial is a phenomenon that crops up to challenge almost every accepted case of genocide. The genocide committed by the Pakistan army during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is no exception. Because of the scale of the atrocities in 1971 against a civilian population of 70 million people, it has proved impossible for genocide deniers to claim that the atrocities did not occur. Instead, they have focused on two tactics used to deny most genocides: that the magnitude of the killings was not that great, and that the Pakistan army had no systematic policy of genocide.

The grim numbers of 1971: Genocide versus denial

Most estimates of the 1971 genocide put the death toll between 300,000 and 3 million Bangladeshis, with between 200,000 to 400,000 women raped. R.J. Rummel, in his book *Statistics of Democide: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900*, puts the death toll at around 1.5 million. Gendercide Watch terms the 1971 genocide as one of the most concentrated acts of genocide in the twentieth century. Susan Brownmiller, in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, puts the number of women raped by the Pakistan military and their local collaborators, the *razakars*, between 200,000 and 400,000. According to Brownmiller, the Pakistani army raped Bengali girls as young as eight and grandmothers as old as seventy-five.



After the War, the Pakistan government produced a report -- the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report -- on the actions of the Pakistan army in 1971. While the report acknowledged that the Pakistan army had indeed committed atrocities in Bangladesh, it downplayed the extent of the atrocities and denied that there was any systematic policy of genocide. The report put the death toll from the genocide at 26,000, based on "situation reports submitted from time to time by the Eastern Command to the General Headquarters."

The Pakistani report's estimate of 26,000 dead stands in stark contrast to every other estimate of the death toll of between 300,000 to 3 million. The report was an attempt by the Pakistan government to dictate the narrative before the true extent of the genocide became evident to the world. The Pakistani report has, nonetheless, stood as the document of last resort for most 1971 genocide deniers.

Sarmila Bose's (questionable) claims

Following up on her 2005 paper denying the extent of the 1971 genocide, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Sarmila Bose has now published a paper denying the extent of the rape of Bangladeshi women by the Pakistan army and the razakars. In her paper titled "Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War," she states:

"That rape occurred in East Pakistan in 1971 has never been in any doubt. The question is what was the true extent of rape, who were the victims and who the perpetrators, and was there any systematic policy of rape by any party, as opposed to opportunistic sexual crimes in times of war."

At the very beginning of her paper, she lays down the two tactics familiar to all genocide deniers: she questions the extent of the rape and questions whether there was any systematic policy of rape. Ms. Bose argues that claiming "hundreds of thousands" were raped trivialises "the possibly several thousand true rape victims" of the war. She, however, does not offer a good explanation as to how she reached the "several thousand" number, other than saying that so many rapes would not be possible because of the size of the Pakistani army in 1971. She also, unsurprisingly, quotes the Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report to support her assertion that so many rapes could not have occurred.

To try to bolster her argument, she claims that the size of the Pakistani army in Bangladesh was only 34,000 men. Then she asserts: "For an army of 34,000 to rape on this scale in eight or nine months (while fighting insurgency, guerrilla war and an invasion by India), each would-be perpetrator would have had to commit rape at an incredible rate."

The actual number of Pakistani forces at the end of the war, and taken POW by the Indians, was 90,368, including over 54,000 army and 22,000 paramilitary forces. It is not unreasonable to conclude that a force of 90,000 could rape between 200,000 to 400,000 women in the space of nine months. To rape 200,000 Bangladeshi women a Pakistani force of 90,000 would have to rape 2 to 3 women each in nine months. Not only is this scale of atrocity possible by an army engaged in a systematic campaign of genocide, it also has parallels in other modern conflicts (for example, the rape of between 250,000 to 500,000 women in Rwanda within 100 days).

The Pakistan army: Gentlemen in uniform at a time of war

Ms. Bose also paints a picture of the Pakistan military as a disciplined force that spared women and children. Citing her field research she writes: "Bangladeshi participants and eyewitnesses described battles, raids, massacres and executions, but told me that women were not harmed by the army in these events except by chance, such as in crossfire. The pattern that emerged from these incidents was that the Pakistan army targeted adult males while sparing women and children."

However, her field research is contradicted by all available evidence. From the early days of the war, women and girls were targeted for rape and killed. On March 30, 1971, the American Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, sent a telegram to the State Department recounting the Pakistani atrocities in Dhaka. In it he wrote about the massacre at Rokeya Hall at Dhaka University where, according to Blood, the building was "set ablaze and girls machine-gunned as they fled the building."

On March 31, 1971, Archer Blood sent another telegram which recounted atrocities against girls. Blood wrote: "Six naked female bodies at Rokeya Hall, Dacca U. Feet tied together. Bits of rope hanging from ceiling fans. Apparently raped, shot and hung by their heels from fans."

The reports from the American Embassy in Dhaka give us a small window into the systematic killing spree that was Operation Searchlight, the code name the Pakistani army gave to the first stage of the genocide operation.

Throughout her paper, Ms. Bose continues to paint the Pakistan military as a disciplined force not capable of systematic rape. She cited a memo written by General Niazi that reminds his officers that they have a "code of honour" and as "gentlemen and officers" they should abide by it. She then writes that Pakistani officers she spoke to were "indignant" at charges of large-scale rape and claimed that these charges were false.

Ms. Bose follows a similar pattern throughout her paper. She gives credence to the stories told to her by the Pakistani military, the perpetrators of the rapes, and dismisses as "alleged" and not credible the accounts of the rape victims. However, contemporaneous news reports from 1971 tell a different story. For example, an October 25, 1971, a Time Magazine article, detailing the Pakistani military atrocities, reports on women and girls held captive and raped at Pakistani military headquarters in Dhaka:

"One of the more horrible revelations concerns 563 young Bengali women, some only 18, who have been held captive inside Dacca's dingy military cantonment since the first days of the fighting. Seized from Dacca University and private homes and forced into military brothels, the girls are all three to five months pregnant. The army is reported to have enlisted Bengali gynecologists to abort girls held at military installations. But for those at the Dacca cantonment it is too late for abortion. The military has begun freeing the girls a few at a time, still carrying the babies of Pakistani soldiers."

A problematic methodology

Having portrayed the Pakistan military as a benevolent force, Ms. Bose then attempts to discredit a handful of accounts of rape victims as a way of casting doubt on the rapes committed during the 1971 genocide.

She begins by trying to cast doubt on an eyewitness, named Rabeya Khatun, whom she dismisses as illiterate, to rape at Rajarbag. Ms.



Bose then dismisses accounts of two other corroborating witnesses because their testimony was similar to Ms. Khatun's and they, too, were illiterate. Ms. Bose declares the witness's testimony not credible because, "the language is not what would be used either by illiterate sweepers or by educated Bengalis in everyday conversation."

She then finds refuge in the account of a Pakistani Lt. Col. Taj who, unsurprisingly, "categorically denied that any molestation of women had taken place at Rajarbag by his men." Ms. Bose then informs us Lt. Col. Taj was not actually present at Rajarbag after the first night of military action. Yet, she felt the need to inject him as a fact witness.

night of military action. Yet, she felt the need to inject him as a fact witness. Then, she dismisses Ms. Khatun's account as "highly dubious," declaring "until and unless other, credible witnesses come forward, the hellish account attributed to one illiterate woman simply will not suffice."

Dismissing witnesses simply on the grounds of illiteracy is a serious methodological fallacy. Eyewitnesses do not need to read or write to know what constitutes sexual violence. The Pakistan military did not discriminate between illiterate and literate classes in its campaign of killings and rape against Bangladeshis.

Ms. Bose then tries to cast doubt on the account of rape victim Ferdousi Priyabhashini, an educated woman and well-known sculptor. Ms. Bose's argument here is somewhat muddled, but it appears that she is claiming that Mrs. Priyabhashini was less of a rape victim and more of a willing participant.

Ms. Bose writes: "It is highly unusual for someone of her background to admit to having been a rape victim, especially in the conservative societies like Bangladesh." Ms. Bose goes on, "According to her own account, in 1971, Ferdousi Priyabhashini was a mature woman, a divorced mother of three, working for many years."

After a muddled discussion of Ms. Priyabhashini's account of rape by Pakistani soldiers, Ms. Bose concludes that there is an "inconsistency" in Ms. Priyabhashini's account because she feared she would be killed by the freedom fighters. Ms. Bose declares: "Only those who were perceived to have willingly fraternised with the Pakistani regime were at risk of the wrath of freedom fighters, not victims of the regime." It appears Ms. Bose is asserting that since Ms. Priyabhashini feared for her life, she must have consented to having sex with Pakistani soldiers.

In the legal sense, rape is an act of sexual intercourse carried out "against a person's will by means of force, violence, duress, menace, or fear of immediate and unlawful bodily injury on the person or another." The calculated rationale of the act of war-time rape constitutes a political act, and an attack on the collective political identity of the group of females under attack, not necessarily on their individual identities. Rape during genocides is not exclusively an attack on the body -- it is an attack on the "body politic." Its primary goal is not to maim or kill a person (though that does, in fact, happen, in great numbers) but to control an entire socio-political process by crippling it.

Put another way, during genocides, rape has been used as a weapon of social control and cultural destruction, of devaluation and commodification.

Genocidal rape is not rape out of control, it is rape under control. All existing evidence points to the fact that the Pakistani military specifically targeted Bengali women and girls. This targeting was not a by-product of war, but a systematic campaign of genocidal rape. The historic Akayesu trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda established that rape constitutes an act of genocide, and an egregious violation of international law, when it is committed to destroy a targeted group. Given the scale and systematic way in which Bangladeshi women and girls were subjected to rape and sexual violence in 1971, even a rudimentary understanding of the effect of rape on the victim casts doubt on Ms. Bose's argument.

Ms. Bose goes on to try to cast doubt on the account of Akhtaruzzaman Mandal -- a freedom fighter who accompanied Indian soldiers as they took control of a Pakistani position. There, Mr. Mandal states, he saw the corpse of a Pakistani captain lying beside a dead Bengali woman who showed signs of rape. Mr. Mandal also states that four naked women were discovered locked in a building, and one of the women was six months pregnant. Another 16 women were also discovered locked in an adjacent high school, some showing signs of torture.

In discounting Mr. Mandal's account, Ms. Bose writes that she interviewed Pakistani officers who told her that the dead captain was "humane" and had only recently arrived at the location. She accuses Mr. Mandal of "character assassination of an officer who had died defending his country, and therefore, cannot speak in his own defence."

Ms. Bose, once again, is ready to accept the word of the Pakistani soldiers, the perpetrators of rape. However, there are many cases of rapists in this world who appear to be "humane" to those who know them.

In critiquing accounts of seven rape victims describes in Neelima Ibrahim's book *Ami Birangona Bolchhi*, Ms. Bose notes that four of the seven women were abducted by Bengalis and one by a Bihari before being handed over to the Pakistan army. Some of the women were raped by their initial abductors before being handed over to the Pakistan army, to be held in barracks and raped again. Ms. Bose neglects to mention that those who abducted the women were local collaborators, *razakars*, working with the Pakistani military. Nonetheless, she makes the bizarre observation that since the *razakars* had already raped the women, "for the majority of these women, therefore, even if the Pakistan army had done nothing, they would still be rape victims."

The point, of course, is that the Pakistani army *had* done something -- they had raped these women. Whether their initial abductors had also raped the women does not make the Pakistani army any less complicit in their rapes.

An apologia

In this latest paper Sarmila Bose tries mightily to diminish the atrocities committed by the Pakistan military in 1971. She, however, offers very little of substance to back up her assertion that the existing research and documentation of the 1971 genocide overestimates the death toll and the rapes. Her claim that, in her words, the "unsubstantiated and implausible" claims of hundreds of thousands of rape victims distracts attention from the "true rape victims" and "insult the true victims by trivialising their suffering" is itself an insult to the victims of rape in Bangladesh. The number of rape victims does not diminish the suffering of any individual rape victim; the vast number of rapes only demonstrates the heinous

magnitude of the Pakistani campaign. If there is any insult, it is that there is no acknowledgement of all the victims of the Pakistan army's rapes; rather, there is an attempt to dismiss the experiences of rape victims by asserting that these rapes did not take place.

In her attempt at denial, Sarmila Bose relies on the Pakistan government's report on the atrocities and the accounts of Pakistani soldiers, the perpetrators of the genocide. She overlooks news reports from the time, eyewitness accounts, academic works, and case studies. Instead of addressing the issue of genocidal rape in 1971, Ms. Bose tries to deconstruct and discredit a handful of accounts of rape. She targets personal narratives, such as that of Ms. Priyabhashini's, to try to prove the victims were not raped. She does not engage the issue of the number of rapes in any substantial way, or address how her assertions of "several thousand rapes" can be reconciled with numbers put forward by international agencies or independent reports, nor does she engage the discussion of genocidal rape as a war strategy.

In the end, her paper is neither scholarly nor neutral. It is an apologia for the Pakistan army and for the genocide it perpetrated against the Bangladeshi people in 1971.

Notes:

1. Sarmila Bose's paper: "Losing the Victims: Problems of Using Women as Weapons in Recounting the Bangladesh War" can be found on the Internet at <http://www.Epw.Org.in/uploads/articles/11060.pdf>
2. An expanded version of this article can be found on the Internet at <http://www.drishtipat.org/blog/2007/10/10/the-continuing-rape-of-bangladesh>.

Artworks by **PABLO**

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