

## CHAPTER FOUR

*How East Pakistan Was Laid Waste by the Awami League*

Few people reviewing the events of 1971 would approve today of the methods used by the Pakistan Army in its efforts to put down the Awami League rebellion. They were crude methods, ineffectual as subsequent events showed, methods which alienated friends while they did not succeed in exterminating enemies. The Army appeared to be retaliating in blind fury against the insults, taunts, humiliation and provocation which it had had to endure for months. It struck madly at the Bengalis in general, forgetting that the Awami League was not to be equated with the entire Bengali-speaking community, that there were parties in East Pakistan opposed to the Awami League, parties which had scored votes in the elections of 1970. The Army bungled further in not succeeding in arresting a single member of the Awami League executive, with the exception of Mujibur Rahman himself, and he claimed later to have surrendered voluntarily, that is, to have made no attempt to escape.

Most of the people who died in the Army crackdown of March 25 were ordinary folk, the sort of people who enthusiastically attend public meetings perhaps, but there were many among them who did not support the Awami League. Every Bengali that one talks to is able to cite the names of a few Pakistanis who fell a victim to the Army's fury. Indiscriminate action seldom produces the results it aims at, and in this instance it failed lamentably, leaving behind a trail of blood and bitterness.

Some have said that the Army wished to terrorise the entire population, trying to frighten them into behaving. It is doubtful whether terrorisation has anywhere on earth - unless it is sustained terrorisation of which communist and fascist regimes are alone capable - succeeded in reducing a rebellious community to submissiveness. Terror provokes reprisals, and when terror is met with

more terror, the outcome is a vicious cycle of violence which frustrates the aim in view, namely, the restoration of peace.

In East Pakistan, the object before the Army - and this the Army chiefs in their myopia overlooked - was not terrorisation with a view to the suppression of a rebellion, but the preservation of Pakistan's unity. Methods which sapped the foundations of national unity could only be called self-stultifying. The Army officers who planned what was really, as they claimed, the preemptive strike of March 25, seemed to have been concerned with the immediate effects of their action rather than with its long-range consequences or its impact on the psychological unity of the Pakistani people which alone could sustain their unity as a nation. The enemy they set out to crush had been trying to convince the Bengalis that the Pakistani Army was an army of occupation, consisting of mercenaries who had nothing but utter contempt for the language, culture and way of life of this region. The Army's blind fury, its failure to make a distinction between the Awami League and those who believed in Pakistan, its inability to persuade ordinary folk that it was trying desperately to save a cherished ideal, reinforced Mujib's case and was a measure of the success of his strategy.

India's purpose in manoeuvring the province into an armed conflict was to alienate the Army completely from the people, provoke atrocities, and ensure the destruction of its economy. Mujibur Rahman's followers helped her to realise all that she wanted or wished for.

No sooner had war broken out than large-scale massacres of the non-Bengali population began. The Army described as a Punjabi army - had to be harassed and destroyed, but parallel to the campaign against the Punjabis there proceeded an equally systematic campaign against non-Bengali residents lumped together descriptively under the term Biharis. They were non-combatants, but the Awami League regarded them because of their known adherence to the cause of Pakistan as a fifth column, which had to be eliminated. Whether they were politically vocal, whether they overtly supported the Army, whether they had money or possessions, was immaterial. They were aliens, whose presence was considered offensive, and whose removal, it was thought, would hasten the dawn of independence for the Bengalis. It was however not enough to kill them. They had to be subjected to the most

barbarous indignities, the most atrocious cruelties that human ingenuity could devise. Children were clubbed to death; women were raped and afterwards had their breasts cut off; men were bayoneted or shot or decapitated after hours of torture. Where Awami League mobs could get hold of whole families, they pinioned the parents, raped or murdered the children in their presence, and then either shot or beheaded them. Many were burnt alive; some had their eyes gouged out; many were slowly sliced and salt was applied to their wounds as the slicing proceeded. Attractive nubile girls were seized and used for immoral purposes by groups of gangsters in succession. There was no crime from which these mobs desisted; no atrocity from which they shrank; no indecency which they did not commit. And the mobs consisted of students mostly, some of them from colleges and universities. Where there were other elements, they were usually led by a student. They thought their actions perfectly justified, because they believed honestly that a war of national liberation justified everything. They also believed that what they did and were being asked to do was a retaliation against Army atrocities.

The campaign against the non-Bengali population had actually been put in train in February 1971, and the Army crackdown of March 25 merely provided an excuse for stepping it up. The crackdown which the Awami League had been anticipating served as a green signal for a programme planned in meticulous detail much in advance. Long before reports of any happenings in Dacca and other places could possibly reach anybody, previously prepared stories were spread by word of mouth to incite mobs to spontaneous fury. Dacca heard the most extraordinary stories of how sections of the population of the port city of Chittagong were being gunned down. Chittagong in its turn heard how a young woman had allowed herself to be mown down by a tank in protest rather than silently witness the slaughter of her own people, how hundreds of Dacca University staff and students had been brutally shot, how the residents of a women's dormitory had hurled themselves to death from a first-floor balcony to escape torture, and so on. Similar stories were broadcast about Khulna, Jessore and Rangpur.

The mobs which in each case took upon themselves the task of avenging these alleged brutalities convinced themselves that the Punjabis and Biharis must be paid back in their own coin. They

were defending the honour of their mothers and sisters. The only way they could efface the shame of what they heard had been done to them was by repeating the crimes on their victims.

No complete record has been compiled of the activities of these organised mobs. They were at work wherever there existed any non-Bengali groups: Dacca, Narayanganj, Chittagong, Jessore, Khulna, Paksey, Saidpur, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Mymensingh. Even such outlying areas as Brahmanbaria, Noakhali, Chuadanga, and Lalmonirhat did not escape their attention. Many of these places were cut off completely from Dacca when the crackdown began; they reverted to a form of anarchy which did not end until Army reinforcements could be sent out to restore order. As soon as Mujibur Rahman announced his boycott of the Centre on March 2, the non-Bengali community became the target of attacks by Awami Leaguers. The pogrom grew in intensity and pace as the political kaleidoscope on the national level kept changing. The declaration on March 7 that the struggle had full independence for its aim coincided with the launching of a full-scale war. Organised killing began first in distant areas which the Army could not easily reach. In the capital, naturally greater restraint was used for fear of punishment by the armed forces, whose headquarters was situated at Kurmitola, a Dacca suburb.

How many people lost their lives between March 7 and March 25 no one knows accurately. It is estimated that nearly half the non-Bengali community was wiped out before the crackdown started. The number certainly exceeded a hundred thousand.

It is important to remember this, because the usual theory disseminated in Awami League circles is that the killings were in every instance a retaliation against Army atrocities. They were not. The Army did commit brutalities in many places, but they are in a majority of cases accounted for by Awami League killings. What the Awami League was carrying out was a cold-blooded, well-planned campaign of total liquidation, partly in order to exterminate their enemies outright and partly to provoke reprisals. The greater the magnitude of the reprisals the greater the hatred that could be generated against Pakistan.

It is reported on good authority that in many areas *agents provocateurs* excited passions among illiterate Biharis by propaganda or by minor incidents. Then these incidents were used as a justification for retaliatory violence. Hindus in disguise played a

prominent part in these activities. Senior Army officers fell a prey to the trap. Confronted with evidence of inhuman brutalities, they lost their heads, (which was what the enemy wanted), and ordered punitive measures. Villages were surrounded and set on fire indiscriminately; any young man belonging to a locality where violence had taken place was suspect; he was liable to be shot unless he could account for himself satisfactorily.

The Army forgot what its true function was. It thought it could bring the situation under control by punishing the rebels; it never bothered to consider how the excesses of which it was guilty could negate its basic aim, which was the preservation of Pakistan's solidarity.

By the middle of May 1971, the province of East Pakistan was in the throes of violence and counterviolence following in each other's wake. No end to this could easily be foreseen. The Awami League depended for their campaign upon guerrillas trained in India. The Army had by the beginning of May been able to re-establish administrative control over most areas; mass uprisings of the kind witnessed between March 2 and the end of April now ceased. Effective patrolling by Army units rendered this impossible. What went on was sporadic attacks on unprotected towns and villages, raids on power installations, industrial establishments, banks, bridges and other means of communication and wherever possible on exposed Army garrisons.

How thoroughly these details had been planned was demonstrated by the appearance of trained guerrillas within a week of the Army crackdown of March 25. Hundreds of young volunteers who obviously had been carefully trained in the use of fairly sophisticated fire-arms turned up singly and in groups as part of a 'liberation' force. The world has been told both by India and Bangladesh that the Mukti Bahini (or the Mukti Fauj as it was initially called; the substitution of the Sanskrit term Bahini for the Persian Fauj is significant) was Bengal's response to the unprovoked attack launched on an unarmed population on March 25. To swallow this one has to believe that young boys of eighteen or nineteen who had never handled a rifle before, now, under the stimulus of a brutal challenge, learnt to employ with dexterity not only rifles but light machine guns, bren guns, and other more sophisticated weapons, in a matter of hours. Not only did they learn the use of weapons, they mastered in the same space of time

the art and science of radio-communication. One must also accept that lethal weapons were accessible in the province and could be obtained for the asking. How otherwise could so many acquire guns?

Of course one stock answer is that the Mukti Bahini was at first made up of deserters from the police and the East Pakistan Rifles. That is not true. The deserters were a group apart; they continued till the end almost to be identifiable because of their special uniform. The volunteers who now swarmed across the border from India were not deserters. They were young men recruited in advance of the crackdown, trained and held in readiness for the crisis which exploded on March 25. They had no uniform, they wore whatever was available; some were village youths who did not even have shoes. But they had guns and rifles; they carried hand-grenades, and they knew the essentials of radio communication.

The most inescapable proof against the theory of a spontaneous reaction to the Army crackdown was that wherever they appeared these young guerrillas were conscious that they were members of a province-wide fraternity. They knew that other young people elsewhere were engaged in the same kind of activity.

Of course, the Army's stupidity helped swell their numbers. As Army units spread out, Awami League youths who had been busy organising processions and marches and raids, fled into India and were immediately absorbed into the guerrilla forces. Instead of trying to wean misguided youths from the sterile track of guerrilla warfare, and gain their confidence, the Army frightened them by its indiscriminate drive against entire localities. Acting upon the belief, well-founded though, that the Hindu minority formed the backbone of the secessionist movement, it embarked about the beginning of May upon a campaign designed to force the Hindus to emigrate. Whatever care the Army took to separate the sheep from the goats in the case of Muslims was flung to the winds as far as the Hindu minority was concerned. With a naïveté which was sometimes pathetic, if touching, senior Army officers expounded the view that if the Hindus could be turned out, the province could be made safe for Islam. They had little idea that the creation of a refugee problem in India would lead to complications of a very different nature which would defeat their real aims.

It should have been clear to the meanest intelligence that the

quickest way of saving Pakistan was to ensure the province's return to normalcy as soon as possible. This was certainly not the time to add to confusion by creating fresh problems. There had been no refugee problem in April, nor need one have come into being at all, if the Army had confined its activities to the restoration of order. Foolishly, in spite of protests from many countries, it went ahead with its drive against the Hindus. In the event, the refugee problem proved a kind of Achilles' heel which India turned to account with unerring and consummate skill. The Pakistan Army did not foresee what India correctly assessed: that the flight of people across the borders would be acceptable to the world outside as the most indisputable evidence of Pakistan's tyranny and swing international opinion against her. A refugee problem involving two countries could not be called a domestic issue, particularly when the refugees numbered thousands. The figures given by India were however wholly inflated. Nobody in Bangladesh today believes that ten million people could have crossed the borders. At a liberal estimate, a hundred and fifty thousand may have temporarily run away into India. But even this is a staggering figure. The question is: why did Pakistan help create such a problem?

India, as is now clear from the admissions of the Awami League, was ready in March 1971, with an organisation capable of looking after those Awami League workers who might find it necessary to seek temporary sanctuary on her soil after the rebellion broke out. But the proportions of the flow of refugees gave an unexpected fillip to her efforts to dismember her enemy by mobilising the international forum against Pakistan. As soon therefore as it became clear that Pakistan on her own had set in motion a process which would send people fleeing from their homes, India did all she could to sustain and augment the flow.

The refugee problem was responsible for difficulties of two kinds. First it antagonised international opinion, which initially had been disposed to treat the uprising in East Pakistan as an internal issue. The British foreign secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, in a statement soon after the outbreak of the war had refused, in spite of pressure from certain groups in Parliament, to be drawn into a discussion on the rights and wrongs of the dispute between the Government of Pakistan and Mujibur Rahman. But opinion in Great Britain and elsewhere changed dramatically when India appealed to the world for sympathy and practical help in tackling a refugee problem of

gigantic proportions. What better evidence could there exist of Pakistan's 'genocide' against the Bengalis than the presence of thousands of homeless men, women and children in Indian relief camps?

By a single stroke India won the world over to her side and also convinced a large body of Bengalis inside East Pakistan that in this hour of crisis she was the only true ally and friend to whom they could turn for succour. Sensible men who had no illusions about India's designs on East Pakistan were heard to say that Indian assistance to the refugees constituted sufficient atonement for all the sins she had ever committed against the province. The warnings against India issued by Pakistan fell on deaf ears. India's role as the friend of humanity in distress seemed to these people so unmistakable that nothing could then persuade them that she could have other motives in running relief camps. If she was engaged also in extracting some political advantage from the situation, was she not fully entitled to do so? Had she not by her selfless labours in the cause of the downtrodden earned the right to do what she was doing? Pakistan found herself outmanoeuvred.

The other consequence of the refugee problem was that it upset the communications system, blocked the roads, and disrupted the normal economy of the villages and towns. As hundreds fled, they commandeered whatever transport was available, boats, pedicabs, cycles, carts, cars, lorries and rendered the movement of goods, grain in particular, impossible for ordinary commercial purposes. Local shortages occurred; consumers' goods vanished from shops; prices went up. These conditions spread fear, and fear led to a further outflow of men and women from their homes. The scenes of confusion that were seen on the roads were neither a contribution to social and political stability nor could they possibly facilitate military operations. They helped only to further the enemy's designs.

For one of the first things attempted by the rebels was the disruption of the economy. Awami League workers, public officials, police officers, business men, whoever were supporting the rebellion were called upon to rob banks and treasuries, pillage government granaries, and carry off whatever was available. That this again could have been no sudden decision, spontaneously arrived at, is shown by the uniformity in the pattern of development discernible all over the province. Nurul Qader Khan, deputy commissioner of

Pabna district, is reported to have made away with seventy to eighty million rupees in cash from the local treasury and banks, carted off all the grain in the local warehouses, and also to have removed to India all cars, lorries and railway coaches that he could collect. The deputy commissioner of Kushtia did the same thing, but not on the same scale, because the resources of his district were more limited. The officers who defected considered it an act of patriotic duty to deplete the areas under their control of food and transport and turn the booty over to the Indians across the borders. A. R. Mallick, who was vice-chancellor of Chittagong University and who had been allowing a company of deserters from the East Pakistan Rifles to use his campus as a base, fled with all the money in the University bank and all the cars he could lay his hands on.

No border town or village was safe from these depredations. Whoever could, drove off cars and trucks regardless of their ownership. The Jessore and Chuadanga area had a unique experience. After the Jessore garrison was overpowered and decimated and before the arrival of large reinforcements from Dacca later in April, this region was declared 'liberated'; the border with India was thrown open, and one of the earliest achievements of the 'liberated' zone was to help re-lay railway tracks between East Pakistan and West Bengal to facilitate trade. Railway engines, trucks loaded with grain and other foodstuffs were daily transferred to Calcutta in prodigious quantities. The railway track helped supplement what was being transported along the roads by truck. Steamers, mechanised boats, and other forms of transport on the river were similarly driven into India. What could not be taken away was destroyed. Country boats and launches were sunk wherever it proved difficult to carry them off.

Several hundred million worth of currency notes were in this way transferred to India. Of the number of cars, trucks, lorries, railway engines and coaches removed, no reliable estimate is available, for now the policy is to deny that anything of the kind happened during the nine-month war. Whatever is missing is attributed to the vandalism of the Pakistan Army; if engines or trucks or cars fall short of the number recorded in pre-December, 1971 books, they must have been destroyed by the Punjabis. But the local inhabitants know the truth.

How patriotism could be invoked to justify acts of pillage is not clear to many. But the Awami League had no compunctions on the

issue. Although it is known, and was also known then, that the plundered money and goods were not deposited into a common account or fund but put to such uses as individual plunderers thought desirable, the practice, far from being condemned, was encouraged. When India set up a clandestine radio station for the rebels in Calcutta, it daily broadcast encouragements to youths contemplating these acts of robbery and plunder and congratulations to those who successfully accomplished them. It did not matter from the rebels' point of view who got the booty. The important thing was the depletion of East Pakistan's resources and the denial to the enemy of whatever advantages they afforded. A war, they believed, justified everything, dishonesty, theft, pillage and barbarity.

Most of the money plundered from banks and treasuries found its way into private accounts in Indian banks. When Tajuddin and his friends organised a government in exile, they asked for the booty but received a fraction of what was misappropriated. Nobody could be called to account for anything done; no one knew how much money had been grabbed, nor how many cars and other things acquired. Most of these goods were exchanged for cash in India.

The disappearance of hundreds of thousands of currency notes created quite a stir. The demonetisation order by Pakistan invalidating certain denominations of notes, caught the rebels unprepared perhaps, but they had swallowed so much that failure to assimilate all of it made no material difference to their fortunes.

To suggest that everyone of the refugees had huge quantities of currency notes and other plunder to depend upon would however be untrue. The majority were humble people without possessions, who suffered terribly. But none of the Awami League leaders lacked money. It is to this period that the history of the private fortunes of Awami League ministers and their lieutenants must be traced.

Theirs was a very unorthodox way of conducting a war of national liberation. Under the pretext of depriving their enemy of money and material resources, they practised what was probably the greatest robbery of modern times, a robbery of colossal proportions, to line their own pockets and in utter and contemptuous disregard of the plight of their fellow countrymen. If anyone apart from themselves derived any advantage from the robbery it

was of course India. The funds they spent and the grain and other articles they took were ample recompense for any expenses India claimed to be incurring on account of the refugee problem. Her humanitarianism proved a highly paying proposition.

Robbery and plunder were not the only crimes advertised as patriotic acts. The guerrillas engaged in systematic sabotage, cutting off roads, blowing up culverts and bridges, destroying power installations, wrecking industrial plants. The most vital ones were guarded by the Army, but those which could not be so protected were subjected to attacks. Efforts were made by trained frogmen who defected from the Pakistan Navy to paralyse both Chittagong and Khulna ports. The jute industry, East Pakistan's main foreign exchange earner, was singled out for special attention. Arson in jute warehouses was a frequent occurrence. Boats loaded with raw jute were sunk wherever possible.

The rebels knew that loss of jute exports would hit the country's economy hard, and might lead to a famine. They did not care. If they had succeeded completely in their designs, they would have reduced the whole of the region to a total ruin, to force the Pakistan Army to give it up as a worthless possession. The clandestine radio from Calcutta openly declared that it mattered little how many died or what damage was caused to the economy. The Punjabi enemy was to be liquidated at any cost.

Those who questioned whether reckless destruction would not wreck the possibility of the rebels - if they won - inheriting a going concern, were told that once the enemy was driven off the future would take care of itself. No distinction was made by saboteurs between property owned by the Bengalis and what belonged to other groups. Indiscriminate destruction was the rule, and it was sought to be justified by the argument that the only thing that mattered was victory.

Those who managed to cross the border into India were persuaded to look upon their own homes as enemy territory which had to be pulverised. The defeat of the Pakistan Army as a war aim seemed at times to be less important than the total disruption and destruction of the industrial base which had been built up slowly over a period of twenty-three years. The misguided youths who joined the 'liberation' force little realised how they were helping to wreck their own future. Many of them were romantically-minded, if foolish; they were too young and too inexperienced to see

through the diabolical designs which they were called upon to execute. Where they appeared to themselves to be 'liberating' a country, they were working for the permanent enslavement of their motherland by violent political, and economic means. Little could they conceive that the unleashing of passions, usually held in check by the moral code, can have a boomerang effect upon the perpetrators of crimes. They could not imagine that a free society cannot be created by encouraging the defiance of all laws, that law-breakers cannot easily return to the rule of law. Finally, they saw only the trees, not the wood as a whole. Those who blew up a factory or a bridge saw only a factory or a bridge being destroyed; they did not realise the impact, present and future, of those acts of destruction upon the economic life of the motherland they claimed to serve. A blind passion possessed their souls. But those in India who directed their operations knew their minds and were able to assess the short-term and long-term consequences of the warfare they urged these youths to wage.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Planting Hatred Between Bengalis and Non-Bengalis*

How diabolical Mujibur Rahman's plans were is shown further by the nature of the war his followers fought against the Pakistan army as well as the Urdu-speaking population settled in East Pakistan. If one cares to examine the chain of events from 1969 until 1971 - it is possible to go even further back - one cannot have any doubt that the Army crackdown of March 1971 was something Mujibur Rahman must have been anxiously praying for. It dovetailed so beautifully into his grand design.

Hitherto he had been waging a one-sided campaign denouncing the Urdu-speaking Pakistanis as exploiters and blood-suckers, painting Monem Khan, the Governor of East Pakistan and other loyal Pakistanis as stooges, and occasionally urging his adherents to exterminate the Biharis physically. Minor anti-Bihari incidents in areas with large non-Bengali populations had been occurring since the late sixties. But there had been no organised response, no planned retaliation. Nevertheless, whenever any Bengali chanced to be killed, Mujibur Rahman tried to fan the flames of civil strife by talking of genocide. The casualties - numbering no more than half a dozen - in the opening months of 1971 resulting from the government's efforts to suppress an outbreak of arson and pillage, were universally described in the Awami League press as indisputable proof of a planned campaign of genocide against the Bengalis. Shriill cries arose on all sides demanding vengeance against the perpetrators of these atrocities. Ordinary Biharis found it difficult to move about safely. The areas with heavy concentrations of Biharis, such as Mirpur and Mohammadpur near Dacca, Saidpur, Ishurdi assumed the semblance of veritable ghettos.

The Awami League began after the election of 1970 to fret over their failure to set in motion a regular civil war such as would drive a wedge permanently between Bengalis and non-Bengalis. The

Army and the non-Bengali population had to be provoked into doing something which could be used as the pretext for an open declaration of full-scale war against them. President Yahya Khan's announcement on March 1, 1971 postponing the forthcoming session of the National Assembly was seized upon by Mujib as an excuse for a siege against the Dacca Cantonment. Although up to this point, the Army had not been taking part directly in political developments, the real enemy, Mujibur Rahman declared, consisted of the Pakistani soldiers: They must be starved into capitulation. So effectively was the siege organised that it became really difficult for those living in the Cantonment to obtain any fresh foodstuffs. Children had to go without milk, adults without fresh vegetables, meat and eggs. Plans were got ready to cut off the supply of electricity. It was rumoured that the Awami League would slowly close in on the Cantonment and then launch a desperate assault.

The Army however remained unmoved. Despite the daily taunts in the press and food shortages, no punitive action was taken against Awami League urchins who rode up and down the road leading to the Cantonment urging people to liquidate the 'occupation' army. Many wondered how the armed forces could put up with such open insults and still retain their effectiveness. They were allowing their prestige to be damaged beyond repair, and also acquiescing in a fast-increasing outbreak of lawlessness which was to engulf them completely. Be that as it may, the fact remains that from the middle of February up to March 25, the Army chose for reasons which have never been made clear to play a more than passive role, silently enduring the defiance hurled at it.

When Mujibur Rahman declared at the public meeting held at Ramna on March 7 that his struggle aimed at complete independence, many expected that the Army would at last be provoked into action. The March 7 statement amounted to a virtual declaration of independence. When the government failed to take official notice of it, a large part of the loyal public was seized with despair, and began to feel totally non-plussed. The Awami League for its part, in its own campaign for an immediate civil war, viewed the Army's passivity in the face of its threats as a sign of weakness. New provocations were devised; isolated Army units here and there were attacked; the persecution of the non-Bengali minority was stepped up and stories now daily poured in of the new Bangladesh

flag being forcibly flown from the tops of official buildings, of defiant Biharis being harassed and sometimes being beaten to death. What the Awami League hoped and worked for was a large-scale swoop-down on the miscreants, so that it could tell the world that it was the Army itself which had set the civil war in motion. The first move, the initiative, had to come from the other side.

Tiring finally of the Army's reluctance to respond to pin-pricks, Tajuddin, Mujib's principal lieutenant in his negotiations with Yahya Khan in March, threw out a challenge on March 23. If the government did not yield within the next twenty-four hours, the Awami League, he said, would act and forcibly seize power. It has been learnt since that what they wanted the government of Yahya Khan to yield to was not the original charter of Six Points, but open dismemberment of the State. Yahya Khan had at this stage been prepared to concede the Six Points in their entirety, in the hope that thereby the country's integrity - or some semblance of it - could be preserved. But as the negotiations had proceeded, the Awami League demand had been stepped up, and finally it faced the President with a clear choice: either agree to break the country up or face war.

Meanwhile, as all subsequent developments showed, armed Awami League workers had been converging on Dacca. Plans for barricades on important thoroughfares had been got ready. When eventually the Army struck, on March 25, in a final desperate effort to forestall an attack by the Mujibites, the Awami League's civil war strategy was immediately put into operation. Within hours, barricades appeared on the main roads; bridges were attacked, and the indiscriminate slaughter of the non-Bengali population and well-known loyal Pakistanis began. What had begun as a trickle now broadened into a turbulent stream. The Army crackdown as a matter of historical fact came a little while after a full-scale revolt had been unleashed. Bengali officers at Jessore and Chittagong cantonments are now known to have gone into action on March 25 in accordance with a prepared plan, massacring their colleagues and their families. The East Pakistan Rifles - E.P.R. for short - deserted their posts; units of the Ansars, an auxiliary para-military force, also joined the rebels. Furious mobs fell upon unsuspecting non-Bengali localities and started a campaign of arson, pillage and murder.



How many were killed by the Awami Leaguers between March 1 and March 25 is not known for certain. But the casualties numbered thousands undoubtedly, for thousands were found untraceable after the 25th. Many more were exterminated in the weeks that followed. For the Awami League attacked wherever the Army was unable to maintain a visible and tangible presence.

There was no atrocity that was avoided; no cruelty that was not perpetrated; no indecency that was not practised. Men are known to have been sliced open, flayed alive, slowly chopped up; women to have been raped, to have had their breasts ripped off; children to have had their arms or legs amputated or to have been thrown on raging pyres. Girls were molested before the eyes of their parents and then shot before the assailants dealt with the latter. Even today fresh stories of indescribable atrocities are being received from eye-witnesses who have been able to escape, or who now feel free to talk.

Thousands of corpses, mutilated and disfigured were loaded on bullock carts or lorries and thrown into rivers. After March 25, train loads of wounded, those who had survived the holocaust in their localities, arrived in the safe zones patrolled by the Army, and the scenes they described were almost unbelievable. That men could descend to such bestialities seemed inconceivable. Yet the stark truth, staring everybody in the face, was that these brutalities had actually happened, organised and supervised by people who passed for ordinary, educated, normal citizens. The most appalling aspect of these gruesome episodes was that in almost every case, the horrors had been greater in inverse ratio to the level of education among the assailants. Teachers, students, lawyers, doctors, supposedly the most politically conscious section of the community, had taken upon themselves the duty of saving the Bengalis by liquidating the enemy. Senior teachers from Dacca and Rajshahi Universities and the colleges under them enlisted in the so-called Mukti Bahini and joined the marauding bands who now roamed the countryside attacking non-Bengali pockets.

Nowhere was there any direct confrontation between the Army and the Awami League guerrillas. The latter believed in sudden attacks on undefended positions and hit-and-run tactics calculated to confuse army men.

The immediate effect of the crackdown of March 25 was to force the Awami League to scatter and lie low for a while. This was part

of a plan designed to convince the world that what the Leaguers did was a reprisal against Army violence. But in fact trained guerrillas appeared both within the country and from across the borders within hours of the crackdown, and joined the Bengali rebels from the Army and the E.P.R.

Outsiders have been told repeatedly how the Pakistan Army suddenly without notice launched a deadly war against unarmed Bengalis and how the latter found themselves forced to defend the honour of their womenfolk and the safety of their ancestral homes by taking up arms against it and engaging in an unequal fight against heavy odds. This does not have the least relation to truth. What the Army had to face was an armed insurrection in which not only Bengali deserters from the Army itself but guerrillas trained on Indian soil were taking part. The number of guerrillas increased as month by month young men fled across the border and joined the training camps in India. The thoroughness and efficiency with which the entire operation was organised is a complete refutation of the theory that the training and creation of the guerrilla army was an improvised response to Pakistan's atrocities.

The campaign of extermination and slaughter that the Awami League now pursued openly had for its target not only the non-Bengali population in East Pakistan but also those elements - and there were thousands like them - who were known to be supporters of Pakistan and were opposed to secession. Religious leaders with outspoken views on the position of Pakistan in the world of Islam were singled out for special treatment: they were tortured and afterwards butchered in public places, whenever possible. Village chiefs who tried to defend their motherland against the incursion of India-based guerrillas paid a heavy price for their patriotism.

Most of the killings by the Awami League before the fall of Dacca occurred between March 1 and 31. Thereafter with the Army patrolling the entire province, there was a decline in the number of casualties; for whatever slaughter took place now was in the course of occasional raids. Then after December 16 began real organised vengeance, with the Mukti Bahini having a free hand in settling old scores.

The killers had twin purposes in view. One of course was to liquidate physically as many of the non-Bengalis and loyal Pakistanis as was possible. The other - which they never lost sight of -

was to plant the seeds of bitterest hatred between the Bengalis and such non-Bengalis as survived so as to render any future reconciliation impossible. The Awami Leaguers were therefore not content only to kill. The brutalities which accompanied the killing were intended to stamp the incidents permanently on survivors' memories, so that they would never forget.

The attacks carried out by the guerrillas were in many cases a sort of booby-trap designed to provoke the Army to retaliate in fury. To their everlasting shame, the Pakistani generals failed to understand the game and walked blindly into the trap set for them. Instead of realising what the Awami League strategy was, they would allow themselves to be maddened by the scenes of horror by which they found themselves confronted, and then order punitive action against whomsoever they thought guilty. The real offenders would be miles away by the time the Army arrived, and the brunt of the punishment – ruthless and cruel – would fall on comparatively innocent villagers who at worst could be described as sympathetic spectators. This is how most of the brutalities by the Army took place. Punitive action sometimes meant entire hamlets being set on fire, able-bodied adults being arrested and carried off, and sometimes shot on the spot.

Each time an incident of this kind occurred, Indian propaganda magnified it tenfold or twentyfold and spread the horrifying tale to the world outside as well as the East Pakistan public. A special radio station was established at Calcutta for this purpose. Styled Radio Free Bangladesh, it was supposedly run by Bengali refugees, though the people of East Pakistan knew how it was operated. The news and stories it broadcast every day painted a picture of Army ruthlessness which was calculated to horrify and appal.

There were occasional cases of rape by Pakistani soldiers, plain extortion, robbery by intimidation, and killings of ordinary village folk. The Army generals sometimes forgot that they were not fighting a war in the conventional sense against a conventional foe but trying to reduce a rebellious population to discipline and order. The two are different things, and the distinction was lost sight of. Of the errors that the Army committed, this was the most deplorable, and the most fatal. Its consequences proved so far-reaching as to negate completely the efforts of those who even at that late hour tried to persuade the Bengali population of the error of their ways. How could they expect any success, when the Army

appeared to distrust everyone who spoke Bengali?

One can well imagine how the enemy must have chuckled. The distrust and hatred between the Pakistan Army and the civilian population facilitated the task of the Indians and the fifth columnists in a remarkable manner. As week followed week, and the Army pursued its campaign rounding up a group of rebels here, punishing a locality there, burning suspect villages, it became easier for the other side to convince the Bengalis that they could expect no succour unless the Pakistanis were thoroughly routed and exterminated. Instead of being seen for what it was, a desperate struggle to preserve a country's integrity and independence against the combined forces of subversion, treachery and aggression, the conflict now assumed in many eyes the character of a crusade against tyranny and persecution. The eminent French writer, André Malraux, was so totally confused by enemy propaganda that as a gesture towards the 'down-trodden' Bengalis he offered – although he was a septuagenarian – to go to East Pakistan and enlist in the Mukti Bahini. A statement of this kind from a man of the intellectual eminence of André Malraux can have the most widespread repercussions, and this particular declaration seemed to be the final proof – if proof were needed at all – of the justice of the cause for which Mujib was fighting. How lamentably Pakistan handled this aspect of her fight against treachery and aggression is demonstrated by her failure to counteract false propaganda. No Pakistani is known to have met M. Malraux and inquired how, without investigations, he could declare his support for the followers of Mujib when thousands opposed him. M. Malraux was no communist; he could have no reason ideologically to commit himself to Mujib's cause, but the fact that he did, showed that he had, available to him, only one biased version of the happenings.

The Army fell into another trap by giving the volunteers' corps known as Razakars, al-Badr, and al-Shams a latitude in their dealings with the enemy, which served in effect to exacerbate feelings. The volunteers were expected to aid the regular army in identifying rebels and to help keep the peace in towns and villages; some took part in actual fighting. But unfortunately there were cases of stray members of the volunteers' corps satisfying their personal grudges against local enemies, and whenever any such case occurred, the details were magnified beyond all proportions and published by India as examples of the horrors which the

'unarmed' Bengalis had to endure. As these stories spread, the Razakars, al-Badr and al-Shams came to be looked upon as Army stooges. Instead of receiving from the world the support that was their due for their patriotism, they were condemned as downright criminals. The crimes daily committed by the Mukti Bahini were forgotten or excused although no Razakar and no member of either of the two organizations indulged in the barbarities which the Awami League employed to terrorise people. Had the occasional lapses of which the volunteers were found guilty been checked, it is certain that things would have been seen in a different light and it would have been impossible for the enemy to point an accusing finger at young men who died fighting against secessionists bent upon destroying their own motherland.

Any lack of restraint on the part of the volunteers was used as a pretext for further barbarities by the Mukti Bahini. The enemy was also able to infiltrate the volunteers corps; there were occasional stories of defections, of young men running away to India with their equipment and joining the Mukti Bahini. These deserters were able to add to the Army's difficulties. But the main body of the Razakars remained loyal to the country, even though branded as accomplices who were helping an 'army of occupation' to retain their hold on Bangladesh territory. In fact, everything, every event, every detail of administration, every rumour or canard was pressed into service to stimulate, fan, and intensify hatred against non-Bengalis. Sometimes the Central government and the Army, although engaged in a war against rebels and traitors, seemed to be playing Mujibur Rahman's game.

It is not to this day clear why no action was taken against him either in February or on March 7, 1971 when he openly declared his aim to be total independence. It is not clear why the government adopted the role of passive spectator between March 7 and 24 while Mujibur Rahman put into operation his scheme of seizing the reins of government by a total boycott. It is not clear why no single member of the Awami League Working Committee (executive) with the exception of the President, Mujibur Rahman himself, was arrested on March 25 when the Army crackdown began. The members of the executive committee as well as the members of the National Assembly belonging to the Awami League were able to cross the border and escape to India with perfect impunity. That not one of them should have been caught

is a mystery which cannot be lightly brushed aside. If this was not due to connivance, the explanation must be incompetence, and in either case the Army has a lot to answer for.

One who calmly reviews the events of the period cannot help feeling that the Army by its blindness, stupidity, bungling and lack of political insight enabled Mujibur Rahman to drive a wedge between the Bengali and non-Bengali sections of the population and to furnish apparently convincing proof of his contention that he was prosecuting a crusade against a set of tyrants. It is also impossible to avoid the feeling that there were elements in the Army and government who deliberately connived at the growth, outbreak, and spread of the conspiracy. People who have lived through the experience of 1971 believe that had the government rounded up Mujib and his followers on or immediately after March 7, before he consolidated his hold on the administration and succeeded in demoralising the loyalists, the rebellion could have been crushed. Some blood might possibly have been shed, but the massacres and brutalities would have been avoided. The government's failure or omission to take decisive action till it was too late, helped the Awami League to bring about a permanent rift between east and west.

It must be realised that the hatred generated against the Pakistan government had by the middle of the year acquired such proportions that had the Army won, and the rebellion been crushed at the end of 1971, the bitterness would have remained as a dangerous legacy. With the illusion about the Awami League's intentions and capacity to deliver the goods it had promised staying untarnished, large numbers of Bengali Muslims would have continued to nurse their dream of false independence.

The Awami League guerrillas scored yet another success by getting the Army to encourage the Hindu population to flee. Foolishly and complacently, the generals kept believing that an exodus of Hindus would help restore peace. The panic which now gripped the Hindus did not leave the Muslims unaffected. As hordes of panic-stricken multitudes fled across the border, India received them into previously prepared camps and called upon the world to witness their plight and aid her in succouring them. A double victory was achieved. The stories which India broadcast daily of the miseries of these uprooted people increased panic inside East Pakistan; a succession of refugees streamed forth, helping to

disrupt the internal administration in border areas, weakening public morale. On the other hand, a large volume of aid poured into India, and ever larger sections of the world became convinced that an unparalleled tyranny had been let loose in East Pakistan. Pakistan stood thoroughly discredited while the real aggressor, India, whose diabolical designs led to all this, gained the world's sympathy for her eagerness to help millions of hapless men, women and children.

As Mujibur Rahman himself disclosed in a speech in 1972, India had promised economic, political, and military aid to those who might have to escape after the outbreak of a full-scale rebellion. Arrangements for the reception of refugees had been made in advance, and the flow of refugees after March 25 was stimulated by spreading tales of horror. The Pakistan government did not at first realise what was happening. The first few batches who fled across the border were dismissed as a bunch of wretches who had been obliged to leave because of their involvement in the rebellion. It was towards the second half of May that the trek across the border assumed the proportions of a real problem, and protests began to be heard from other countries.

By this time, the situation had grown unwieldy. Yahya Khan tried to respond by announcing an amnesty for refugees. But it had little effect, partly because the refugees did not believe that they would be safe back home. Nor did India permit them to leave her refugee camps. Many were forcibly beaten back. India kept multiplying the figures day by day, jumping from thousands to millions in the course of four or five weeks. At the end of June she claimed that the refugees in her camps totalled six million. The figure was finally inflated to ten million. Foreign dignitaries including such persons as Senator Edward Kennedy of the U.S.A. visited the camps and declared themselves appalled by the plight of the refugees.

The whole show was a gigantic hoax. The number of refugees, according to those who later returned, could not on any account have exceeded a hundred and fifty thousand. The visitors who came from outside saw usually a camp or two, and for the rest were content to accept whatever figures India offered. No census was taken at any stage of the entire refugee population, and such was the feeling against Pakistan that it did not ever occur to any of the august visitors to ask for such a census. Any stick was good enough

to beat Pakistan with, and India played her part as the friend of suffering, uprooted humanity to perfection. After all what did it matter whether the figure was a hundred thousand or a hundred million?

Horrifying reports have been received about the manner in which the refugees were treated. India's purpose being political and not humanitarian, very little of the aid, in kind and in cash, provided by world agencies was spent on the camps. An ounce or two of cereals a day was all that many families were given. It was in the able-bodied young men and women that India was most interested. The men were forced to join guerrilla training camps; the young women had to submit to indignities and humiliations to gratify the lusts of the supervising staff. Few of those who came back either during 1971 or afterwards had any pleasant thing to say about their treatment in India. But their voices were drowned in the chorus of universal praise greeting India's efforts to aid the refugees.

Civil war's wounds always take long to heal. The echoes of the American civil war are still audible after the lapse of more than a century since the death of President Lincoln. The Spanish civil war of the nineteen-thirties is still fresh in the memory of most of those alive today. But it is doubtful whether either of those events produced a fraction of the brutalities, horrors, bitterness, and suffering which characterised the conflict of 1971 in East Pakistan. Even those who confess themselves repentant of the error they committed in 1971 in aiding Mujib's campaign against Pakistan are found to repeat, almost unwittingly, the Awami League catalogue of grievances against West Pakistan. They have not been able to free themselves from the xenophobia the Awami League fanned or the suspicion that a reunited Pakistan might again repeat the history, as they viewed it, of the first twenty-three years. In this consists Mujibur Rahman's greatest victory, India's greatest triumph. The miasma of hatred, fear, suspicion, and bitterness which the conflict of 1971 created will long continue - for how long it is impossible to say - to breed dangerous political viruses of all kinds.