

Bihari Struggle to avoid Dismemberment of East-Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The term Bihari refers to the people who speak Urdu and belong to the Indian state of Bihar. They migrated to Pakistan in 1947 to serve in different important institutions of the newly created state. Pakistan faced different internal challenges of language conflicts, power struggle, political instability, and secessionist movements since its independence. This study attempts to answer what decision Biharis took when faced with a rebellion in its East Wing (now a separate country named Bangladesh) in 1971. The paper also highlights what practical efforts were undertaken by the Biharis to quell the rebellion as well as draws attention to the consequences of this struggle.

Introduction

Bihar is an Indian state which is surrounded by Bangladesh and UP (Uttar Pradesh) in the West, Nepal in the South, and Orissa in the North. A sizeable percentage of Biharis belonged to well off, literate families and lived in the urban areas of Bihar,¹ while a reasonable Bihari Muslim population lived in the villages. The means of communication were Urdu

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1 Ahmed Ilias, *Biharis: The Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh: An Objective Analysis* (Syed Pur: Shamsul Haque Foundation, 2003), 21.

and Hindi languages.² Bihari is originally a 'Hindi'³ word literally means 'a person belonging to the Indian state of Bihar'. In Bangladesh, every Urdu speaking person was considered a Bihari, whether he belonged to Bihar or not. During the partition of British-India in 1947, around one million Urdu speaking Muslims from North of India, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, who migrated to former East Pakistan, are also known as Biharis.⁴ At present, around 300,000 Biharis belonging neither to Pakistan nor Bangladesh are presently living in camps in Bangladesh in sub-human conditions.⁵

Historically, Biharis belonged to the skilled working class primarily employed in the railways. On arrival in East Pakistan, they joined civil services, skilled railway and mill workers, small traders, clerks and doctors. Initially, they got good jobs because of adopting Urdu as national language. Many got appointments to replace educated Hindus in administrative jobs and in the mills. Biharis helped to organize the important sectors of the government and were technically well equipped/trained. Since most of their appointments were made by officials from West Pakistan, they were considered agents of West Pakistan. Bengalis started feeling resentment against Biharis' due to the language conflict and their selection on many important positions.

The divide between Bengalis in East Pakistan and West Pakistan and its supporters and Bengali's negative sentiment against Biharis increased over the years and reached its climax in 1971 after the elections of 1970. Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman's Awami League won the elections with a

2 Anwar Baig Awan, *Bihari Musalman Tarikh ky Ainay Mein* [Urdu: Bihari Muslims in the Light of History] (Lahore: Shirkat Printing Press, 1973), 21.

3 Ilias, *Biharis: The Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh*, ix.

4 Ilias, *Biharis: The Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh*, ix.

5 They are Urdu speakers mostly Sunni Muslims. One of the main reasons of their migration was the desire of implementation and practicing Islamic injunctions like other migrant communities.

clear majority and wanted to make government while the West Pakistan was reluctant in handing over the power. Delay in formation of the government and conducting National Assembly session increased tension and mistrust among both the wings of Pakistan which culminated into a civil war.⁶ During this phase, Bihari community faced the challenge to take decision of its fate.

Time for Biharis to Decide

Due to the rebellion of Bengalis in the armed forces, paramilitary forces and police, severe shortage of security personnels was being faced. To overcome this, Pakistan Army made a general appeal to all Pakistanis to come forward and fill this gap. General Tikka Khan encouraged interested people to join army to save the country.⁷ The Biharis had to decide whether they should answer the call and announce their armed opposition to the native Bengali freedom fighters or side with the Bengalis which may prevent them and their families from becoming a target of Mukti Bahini and later Indian Army . Biharis preferred to answer the call of Pakistan Army inaffirmative.⁸

Practical Efforts in Quelling the Rebellion

A huge number of young Biharis enrolled in East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF) and Mujahid force⁹ to support Pakistan Army . The young Biharis included doctors, engineers and students of intermediate, graduates and master's degree holders. They were trained for only a week or 15 days and joined the armed forces at their internal and

6 Siddiq Salik, *Main Nay Dhaka Doobtay Dekha* [Urdu: Witness to Surrender] (Lahore: Al-Faisal Nashran, 2013), 63. See also G. W. Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1974), 186.

7 Hassan Imam Siddique, "Jab Mashriqi Pakistan Bangladesh Bana" [Urdu: When East Pakistan became Bangladesh], *Daily Juraat*, Karachi, December 16, 2009.

8 Lieutenant General (R) A.A.K. Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91.

9 Ilias, *Biharis: The Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh*, 114.

external battle fronts.¹⁰ Biharis were made to go to the frontlines because they were familiar with the shortcuts, nullahs and water streams that would be helpful in the struggle against rebels.¹¹ Under Officer Training Core (UOTC) was instituted by Pakistan Army through which intermediate students were trained.¹² Since Biharis were not adequately trained, so they faced huge life loss. Despite being not as effective as trained and organized soldiers of India and Pakistan yet they fought valiantly.

General Niazi also mentioned that a significant percentage of Bihari civilians also joined the Pakistan Army in the defence of East Pakistan, and they were all working together. He referred to a discussion with Lieutenant General Sagat Singh (General Officer Commanding 4 Indian Corps) after the fall of Dhaka when General Sagat asked General Niazi about the strength with which General Niazi was holding Dhaka Fortress. General Niazi replied that he had 30,000 troops stationed and more were coming. On top of these, he had about 2000 men consisting of retired army personnel and police officers whom they had armed and mixed with Pakistani troops. Many West Pakistani and Bihari civilians also joined the defence force. They were quite a large, well-knit force which had sworn to fight till the end.¹³ General Niazi was of the view that the worst sufferers were the ethnic Biharis, who remained loyal to Pakistan.¹⁴

Biharis fought valiantly as recounted through interviewees. Iqbal Hashmi, brother of Senator Syed Nehal Hashmi, recalled one incident in which he met an average Bihari who was wearing Police uniform and was armed with a police gun, both of which were snatched by a trained and armed

10 Salik, "Jab Mashriqi Pakistan Bangladesh Bana," December 16, 2009.

11 Qaiser Saleem, *Interviewed by the Author*, Rawalpindi, September 10, 2019.

12 Abdul Malik, *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, March 12, 2019.

13 Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan*, 91.

14 Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan*, 94.

Bengali from a nearby police station.¹⁵ Similarly, Roedad Khan in his interview recalled that how Biharis helped him to run from the Dhaka Radio Station which was abandoned by the Bengali staff, to show that everything was normal in the East Pakistan.¹⁶ He further painfully recalled how Biharis fought bravely and were killed. He also mentioned about the scores of Biharis living a humiliating life in the refugee camps in Bangladesh for many decades.¹⁷

Not all Bengalis in East Pakistan were nationalists since many patriotic Bengalis joined Al-Badr (Armed Cadre of Jammata-i-Islami) and Al-Shams (Armed Cadre of Muslim League) to support Pakistan Army and gave their lives for the cause of united Pakistan.¹⁸ Shakil Malik, an EPCAF soldier, was of the view that in these forces, around 60 percent were loyalist and 40 percent worked for the Bengali nationalism and played the role of spy among the forces.¹⁹ A patriotic Bengali after the fall inquired his friend about the sacrifices of Al-Badr. His friend replied that they have sacrificed a lot and it is not possible to comprehend in words.²⁰ Usman Ghani, a member of Al-Badr mentioned that the pro-Mujib Bengalis burnt the houses of most of the Jammata-i-Islami members.²¹ One of the important roles of

15 Iqbal Hashmi, an army officer & brother of Nehal Hashmi, *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, March 06, 2019; Abdul Malik, UOTC (Under Officer Training Corps) *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, March 12, 2019; Dil Sher Ansari, EPCAF Soldier, Interview published in *Tribune*, December 16, 2021; and Hassan Imam, *Interviewed by the Author*, Karachi, October 10, 2020.

16 Roedad Khan, *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, October 10, 2020.

17 Khan, *Interviewed by the Author*.

18 Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13, 150.

19 Shakil Malik, EPCAF Soldier, *Interviewed by the Author*, Karachi, December 15, 2019.

20 Salim Mansoor Khalid, *Al-Badr* (Lahore: Idara Matboat-e-Tulba, 1985), 9.

21 Usman Ghani (Joint Secretary, Economics), Tariq Jamil (Chartered Accountant), *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, September 18, 2019; Prof. Dr. Attaullah Khan, *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, February 5, 2019; Shakil Malik, EPCAF soldier, *Interviewed by the Author*, Karachi, December 15, 2019.

the Al-Badr and Al-Shams forces was to save the water wells from the poison mixed by the Mukti Bahini insurgents.²²

March 23, 1971 was declared as 'Resistance Day' instead of the usual Pakistan Day and Pakistani national flags were replaced by the new 'Bangladesh' flags atop public and private buildings in Dhaka and other towns of East Pakistan. March-past and parades were held by the Paramilitary Liberation Fronts and ex-servicemen. Under the instructions of Awami League, Dhaka Television did not show the Pakistan flag on this day. The situation was reported tense in Mirpur (mainly Bihari populated area) and certain other areas where residents insisted on hoisting the Pakistan flag. Mujib-ur-Rehman (Mujeeb) took the salute at an armed march-past at his residence on which the Bangladesh flag was ceremonially unfurled. On the same day, the people of Bengal showed their hatred for non-Bengalis especially for the then President of Pakistan General Yahya Khan.²³ Mujib and his party took the plunge on 23rd of March by pulling down and burning the national flag and hoisted the Bangladesh flag.²⁴ A larger percentage of Biharis decided to sacrifice everything for the flag of Pakistan and that is the reason that despite of assurances that no Pakistani flag will be hoisted in any of the localities and houses of the Biharis on March 23, 1971, they not only hoisted the Pakistani flag but also celebrated this day with full zest and zeal.²⁵ In Mirpur, many Biharis hoisted a gigantic flag of Pakistan on top of public water-tank that could be seen flapping from a mile in radius. This flag was a message to the Bengalis that most of the Biharis were patriotic Pakistanis, and they will

22 Usman Ghani, Ex Al-Badar Fighter & Joint Secretary Economics, September 18, 2019.

23 Jahanara Imam, *Ekhaterky Wo Din*[Urdu:The Days Of 1971] (Lahore: Jumhoori Publications, June 2012), 48.

24 Ahmed Salim, *Ten Days that Dismembered Pakistan March 15-March 25, 1971: The Real Story of Yahya-Mujib-Bhutto Talks*, Comp. & ed., (Islamabad: Dost Publications. 2001), 224.

25 Engineer Imtiaz Alam Khan, "History: The Fall of Dhaka from Bihari Eyes," *Dawn*, December 15, 2019.

not support Bengalis in their separatist movement. So, the lines were drawn which proved to be gory, bloody, and permanent.²⁶

Consequences Faced by Biharis

The rebellion which started as a civil disobedience movement gained intensity as the time went on due to the indefinite postponement of March 01, 1971 National Assembly session,. On March 23, 1971 (Pakistan Day), Bangladeshi flag was hoisted in the entire East Pakistan except Cantt areas, Governor House, offices of the radio and television and Bihari areas. On the night of March 27, 1971, Major Zia-ur-Rehman (who later reached the post of Major General and became President of Bangladesh) occupied the Chittagong Radio Station and announced the independence of Bangladesh. He said that now all the Bengali soldiers in the army and other army and semi-army institutions are free and they do not have to obey any orders of either Pakistani Army or government and that they should kill them wherever they find them.²⁷ He continued that the Bengalis should occupy all the army barracks and depots of arms and ammunition. He further instigated that Biharis are the representatives of the Pakistan and they supported Pakistan Army so they should be killed. He said that these Biharis are impediment in the independence of Bangladesh.²⁸ After the announcement, Biharis began to be murdered everywhere. Properties, bridges, trains and important defence installations and institutions began to be attacked, burnt and destroyed. The Bengalis in East Pakistan Rifles, Bengal Regiment, Police, volunteer force and other regiments of Pakistan Army rebelled and started killing Biharis. The connections between the cities were severed. Ammunition

26 Khan, "History: The Fall of Dhaka from Bihari Eyes".

27 Hassan Imam Siddique, "Qiyamat Se QiyamatTakk," *Roznama Emman*, Karachi, December 15, 2008; Anthony Mascheranas, *A Legacy of Blood* (Bangladesh: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), 119.

28 Siddique, "Qiyamat Se QiyamatTakk," and Mascheranas, *A Legacy of Blood*, 119.

shops, banks, general stores and every other shop were burnt after looting.²⁹ The words of Major Zia-ur-Rehman, the future President of Bangladesh that those who speak Urdu would be crushed, sealed the Bihari community's fate. When Zia-ur-Rehman troops' brought Bihari prisoners before him, he was heard saying to shoot the men and with women, the Bengalis are free to do whatever they like.³⁰

To control the rebellion, Pakistan Army with the support of young and old Biharis in its army, decided to use force to quell the freedom movement. Pakistan Army started operation on March 25, 1971 in East Pakistan to improve law and order situation. India upon seeing the situation in East Pakistan infiltrated it with criminals trained as Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters) which consisted of civilian Bengalis and ex-Pakistan Army Bengali soldiers. It also extended all kinds of support to Mukti Bahini fighters with the objective to fight against Pakistan Army and secure independence of Bangladesh.

Anthony Mascarenhas who was one of the eyewitnesses of the rebel activities of 1971 and author of the "Rape of Bangladesh" gave account of the Biharis plight. According to him, thousands of Muslims, many of whom were refugees from Bihar, were mercilessly wiped out...More than 20,000 bodies of the non-Bengalis have been found in the main towns such as Chittagong, Khulna and Jessore. The real toll, as was told to him everywhere in East Bengal, may have been as high as 100,000 for thousands of non-Bengalis have vanished without a trace.³¹

Chittagong which consisted of Biharis who were settled there by Ayub Khan and other areas like Firozshah Colony, Shershah Colony, Halisher, Chaowtala, Solashehr, B. B. Haat, Kalo Ghat, Batali Hills, Port Colony and Tigerpass

29 Siddique, "Jab Mashriqi Pakistan Bangladesh Bana," December 16, 2009.

30 Victoria Redclift, "Histories of Displacement and Creation of Political Space: "Statelessness" and Citizenship in Bangladesh," (PhD. Diss. London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011), 54.

31 Ilias, *Biharis: The Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh*, 116.

were attacked and imprisoned at the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) headquarters in Notan Para by rebellious force, Mukti Bahini and Laal Bahini units. These units killed non-Bengali officers, women were raped, and houses and shops were set on fire. Chief Engineer East Pakistan Railways, Muhammad Ishfaq, Dr. Shah Saleem Nizam Uddin Khan and other officers and businessmen were imprisoned and during their imprisonment their blood was taken out by syringes³² and poured in drums until they died. The head of Mukti Bahini was supreme commander Colonel M. A. G. Usmani.³³

Next to Chittagong were Karnaphulli Paper Mills, Kaptai, Ranga Mati and Cox Bazar in which all the Bihari residents were murdered. Only some old, widowed women managed to survive the massacre because they fell unconscious under the dead bodies. The young girls from these areas were kidnapped and taken towards Akiyab (Burma) and Chakma tribal areas and till now they remained missing. The skeletons of men were recovered by the Pakistan Army after the areas were recaptured at the bottom of ditches. A dispatch of the Associated Press of America wire service was mentioned in *The Washington Evening Star* issue of May 12, 1971 which stated that newsmen saw the mass graves of 152 non-Bengali (Bihari) women and children reportedly executed last month by secessionist rebels in the mills recreation club of the jute mills owned by the influential Ispahani family.³⁴

The non-Bengali employees, who were skilled millworkers in Usmania Glass Works, Hafiz Jute Mills, Ispahani Jute Mills, and other factories in Chittagong and the Amin Jute Mills at Bibirhat, the Karnaphuli Paper and Rayon Mills at Chandraghona and its neighbourhood were massacred. The

32 Qutubuddin Aziz, *Blood and Tears* (Karachi: Publications Division of the United Press of Pakistan, 1974), 50.

33 Hassan Imam Siddiqui. "Zindagi," *Daily Riasat*, Karachi, December 16, 2007.

34 Aziz, *Blood and Tears*, 52.

rebels conducted these massacres in the last five days of March and early days of April 1971.³⁵

One of the massacres occurred at the Crescent Jute Mill which was followed by a massacre at People's Jute Mill. Sarmilla Bose writes that after the general strike started in early March, a few of the Biharis were grabbed and killed in the streets but on March 28, 1971, it was a bloodbath in the small compound of the Mill. Those who were out, could not enter and those who were inside the Mill could not escape. Anyone, be it a man, woman or child, was shot at, knifed or hacked to death.³⁶

In Khalis Pur, Star Jute Mills and Chandi Mehal areas, from March 25, 1971 to April 4, 1971, houses belonging to Biharis were destroyed and people were murdered on a large scale. Before severing the heads from their bodies, they were inhumanly tortured. Innocent children and women were dragged on roads till they died. Those women who tried to save themselves by jumping in the canals and rivers were dragged out; their stomachs ripped open like it is done to a fish's stomach and then thrown again in the same canal or river. The colour of the water of the canals and rivers became red with blood of the victims. Their properties were destroyed. Some officers were kidnapped for ransom and later released after getting the ransom money. Around 5000 people were killed.³⁷

From March 25, 1971 to April 11, 1971, mass executions, burning and looting continued. Following the projected D Day, on the night of March 25 to March 26, massive barriers were erected to shut off the port. An estimated 10,000

35 Aziz, *Blood and Tears*, 50.

36 Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 81.

37 Nasr-ul-Allah Ghaloi, "Mashriq Pakistan mein Ghair Bengalioun Per Kiya Beti," [Urdu: What did the Non-Bengalis Go Through in Pakistan], *Hisar PRC [Pakistan Repatriation Council] Jeddah*, ed. Naseem Sahr. 40.

Biharis (non-Bengalis) including port workers were massacred including men, women and children.³⁸

The Dacca University which was already serving as an operational base was also used to make explosives in its laboratories. Part of Jagannath Hall was later dedicated to torturing and killing the kidnapped Biharis. While the army was busy securing the control of the capital city of Dacca, armed Awami League (Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman's Party) militants dispatched hundreds of Biharis to deaths in the night of March 25 and 26, 1971. The militants also used another tactic of first killing and setting ablaze the Biharis and their settlements respectively and blaming the Pakistan Army for it in the foreign press. Hundreds of dead bodies of Biharis were flung into the Buriganga River.

On April 19, 1971 at Isfahani Jute Mill, women and children, and officers and workers belonging to West Pakistan were either murdered or made to disappear or kidnapped. Almost 1000 people were either murdered, went missing or kidnapped.³⁹ On April 27-28, 1971 at Hafiz Jute Mills, many people were killed. One Malik's home was set on fire and all of the occupants of the house were burnt alive except those children who managed to escape. 150 people died in this attack. Other mills were also attacked.⁴⁰

From April 26-30, 1971 at Karnaphulli Paper Mill and Riyan Mills, looting was done on a massive scale. Arson was carried out and people were murdered. Women were imprisoned in their homes among which some were saved, and the survivors narrated stories of rape and barbarism. 2000 people died.⁴¹ Abdul Malik, an eyewitness, also narrated the events happened in Karnaphulli Paper Mills in his interview. From March 26, 1971 to April 22, 1971 at No

38 L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *The East Pakistan Tragedy* (New York: Drake Publishers Inc, 1972), 127-40.

39 Ghaloi, "*Mashriq Pakistan mein Ghair Bengalioun Per Kiya Beti*," 40.

40 Ghaloi, "*Mashriq Pakistan mein Ghair Bengalioun Per Kiya Beti*," 40.

41 Ghaloi, "*Mashriq Pakistan mein Ghair Bengalioun Per Kiya Beti*," 40, and Abdul Malik, *Interviewed by the Author*, Islamabad, March 12, 2019.

Gaon / Santahaar area, the goons of the Awami League, in their effort to restrict the movement of Biharis, erected roadblocks⁴². The town was completely littered with the dead bodies and 15000 people were killed.⁴³

Pakistan Army and Biharis faced Indian Army attacks and Mukti Bahinis' aggression simultaneously. Later, curfew was imposed in these areas by the Mukti Bahini Awami League leaders. In Santahaar, Jamalpur, Fareedpur, Kishitia, Jehnda subdivisions, Memon Singh, Pahartali, Bogra and Notoro areas, women and children were buried alive. Sometimes, the dirt would not properly put and children's weeping noises used to come out so the heartless murderers used to put water and settle the dirt properly. Those areas became a graveyard of people buried alive.⁴⁴

In Parbati Pur, the Madrassa students who used to learn Quran from their prayer leader of the Mosque, entered the mosque and killed their own teacher and dismembered his body by "Raam Dao."⁴⁵ The entire Bihari populace of this area was wiped out. Laal MunnerHaat's renowned traders Asghar Mahajan and Muhammad Hanif were butchered to death along with many other Pakistanis in November 1971. Their homes and factories were first looted and then set on fire. Around 150 people were burnt alive. On December 3, 1971, a train from Laal MunnerHaat started its journey to Rangpur at 8 AM taking the survivors. It reached its destination at 6 PM. The distance of 90 miles was covered in 10 hours because of Indian air force's repeated attacks on the special train. During this journey at least 10 bogeys were riddled with bullet holes and 900 people died. They were buried alongside the railway line in the same clothes they were wearing.

42 Aziz, *Blood and Tears*. 176.

43 Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 85.

44 Hassan Imam Siddique, "Aur Dhaka Doob Gaya," [Urdu: And Dhaka Falls] *Daily Riasat*, Karachi, December 16, 2007.

45 Siddiqui. "Zindagi," *Daily Riasat*, Karachi, December 16, 2007.

Many women and girls preferred death over getting into the hands of enemies. In Chittagong, youngsters were giving up their lives while fighting with petrol bombs, pipes, swords etc. In Santahar and its adjacent railway colony, the assailants slaughtered men, women, children and houses were burnt. Families had to bear the sights of their daughters and women being raped and slaughtered. Out of 80,000, barely 150 people survived. The dead bodies were in such a bad condition that they had to be buried in mass graves.

Sarmila Bose mentions that the disgusting odour of the death could be smelt miles before Major Anis along with his unit could reach Santahar. The dead bodies lined the railway tracks as the station came nearer. Decomposing bodies made the platforms completely full. They stopped for a few hours and made a report for the divisional headquarters. Some Biharis who had survived the bloodbath narrated them what had happened.⁴⁶ Mutinous East Bengal Rifles and Mukti Bahini were committed to take the life of every person who supported united Pakistan or more specifically West Pakistan.⁴⁷

Conclusion

During the rebellion at East Pakistan, Biharis made every effort to save Pakistan from disintegration but their support could not help the Pakistan Army to save it. Biharis fought along with the Pakistan Army to quell the rebellion in the then East Wing. They enrolled themselves in huge numbers in the paramilitary and auxiliary forces. Even pre-teens were present in the ranks. General Niazi also praised them in his book for their valour and acknowledged their role in the efforts to save Pakistan from disintegration. However, despite their efforts, Pakistan was dismembered.

The aftermath of their efforts in quelling the anti-united Pakistan rebellion did not end at the loss of property, life and identity rather it continues to this day. Biharis are languishing in the camps in subhuman conditions in Bangladesh with a hope of a better future. Their services will be remembered in the years to come.

46 Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 84.

47 Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 189-92.