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Genocide in the Liberation War of Bangladesh: A Case Study on Sreepur Genocide, Noakhali

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Abstract:

The Genocide of Bangladesh is one of the most brutal, pre-planned and widespread genocides of the 20th century. Pakistani army along with their local collaborators killed 3 million people and raped more than 2 lakh women only in a period of nine months. Millions of people were injured and uprooted from their houses. Pakistani army established its control over the entire country and carried out brutal genocide in remote areas of Bangladesh. During the Liberation war of Bangladesh, Pakistani army carried out brutal genocide in Noakhali district which is a remote area of Bangladesh. The process of mass killing was going on randomly everywhere across the district. In particular, the paper chooses a case on Sreepur genocide in Noakhali. On 15 June, 1971 the Pakistani army carried out genocide and killed many people at the village of Sreepur in Noakhali Sadar upazila. Besides killing, villages were burned and crops destroyed. With the assistance of their local collaborators the Pakistani army accomplished these atrocious activities in Sreepur. The aim of this paper is to explore the genocide issues in the context of Liberation War of Bangladesh and find out how and why the Pakistani army carried out genocide in Sreepur. In this paper, we bring a case to understand the true history about genocide in the country's remote area and it would enrich the genocide studies of Bangladesh.

Key Words: Genocide, Liberation War, Bangladesh, Pakistani army, Noakhali, Sreepur

Introduction: Bangladesh was born as an independent state following the liberation war against Pakistan in 1971. The liberation war of Bangladesh is the most glorious chapter of

Bangladesh in her history. The independence of Bangladesh involved the killing about 3 million people, raping 2,00,000 women and displacing 10 million people who took shelter in India as refugees in 1971 (Bose, 2007). There are many characteristics of the liberation war of Bangladesh, but the main characteristic of the liberation war of Bangladesh is genocide-torture. Being a supporter of religion, caste and liberation war, the killing of more than one person has been identified as genocide. Physical torture, rape and forced deportation are also part of it. Pakistani army carried out most brutal genocide of the world during the liberation war of Bangladesh in a planned way. Their local collaborators were the Rajakars, Al Badar, Al-Shams and Peace Committees (Dash & Babu, 2019). From 25 March to 15 December, 1971 Pakistani army committed genocide in a planned way to wipe out the Bengalis. With the help of their collaborators, Pakistani army carried out genocide in all over the Bangladesh. After the Operation 'SearchLight' on 25 March, they launched 'Search and Destroy' Operation to the remote areas of the country. As a result of this operation, they carried out genocide-torture in remote areas of the country. *'The principal motive of the West Pakistani leadership was to suppress the Bengalis in such a way that they could continue their domination for a prolonged period of time. The West Pakistani leadership wanted to teach the Bengalis a lesson, so that they could not rise again to demand democracy and autonomy'* (Tripathy, 1972, p. 31–32).

During the liberation war, Pakistani army also carried out atrocious genocide in Noakhali district, which was a remote area of Bangladesh in 1971. There are more than 30 genocidal places in Noakhali district. Sreepur is one of those. On 15 June, 1971 Pakistani army carried out genocide in Sreepur. They committed genocide not only in Sreepur but also in the surrounding villages like Mohabbatpur, Karimpur, Gopai and West Badripur. This genocide is known as Sreepur genocide in the history. At mid-afternoon, 15-20 trucks and lorries loaded with Pakistani army stopped at the main road of Sreepur village. They were accompanied by some members of the local Razakars on that day. They proceeded along the Sreepur road and reached the railway line. From here Pakistani army and Razakars split into three groups and entered Sreepur village. They created a horrific situation by indiscriminate killing of people, raping women and looting at Sreepur, Sonapur, Central Karimpur and the dwellings part of Christian community adjacent to Sonapur railway station. On that day Pakistani army with the help of their local collaborators killed hundreds of people and raped women at Sreepur village. The atrocious killing at Sreepur is an important episode in the history of the genocide of Bangladesh. We particularly limited in focusing on the genocide that happened in Sreepur during the liberation war.

Research Methodology: The research is conducted through Historical, Descriptive and Analytical methods of research. This study is based on data collection from primary and secondary sources. Interviews with eyewitnesses including family members of the martyrs, freedom fighters, local, elderly people were conducted to collect primary data. Data has been collected through Secondary resources including books, articles, journals, magazines, and newspapers etc. In the process of conducting the research, methods which have been used are: field survey by inspection, observation, interviewing and focus group discussion; comparing, contrasting and generalizing the obtained data; data collection from secondary sources like books, prior research works and research reports related to the topics.

Sreepur Genocide (15 June, 1971): Noakhali district was free for about a month after the liberation war started. In April, Pakistani army tried to enter greater Noakhali from Comilla. To enter Noakhali, it took 10 days for Pakistani army to cross this 100 km. road. Pakistani army had to enter Noakhali via Begumganj from Comilla cantonment. They failed several times to enter Noakhali due to fierce resistance of freedom fighters in Begumganj. The Freedom fighters fought against the Pakistani army in Mainamati, Bagmara, Laksam, Daulatganj, Natherpetua, Bipulasar, Saheb Bazar, Bogadia and Bajra. Hundreds of Pakistani soldiers were killed in these wars (Islam, 2014). But on 22 April, the freedom fighters were forced to retreat due to the heavy weapons of the Pakistani army. The Pakistani army entered Noakhali district on 22 April 1971 for the first time and set up their main bases at the Technical High School in Begumganj. After establishing camp in this area, the Pakistani army formed Peace Committees who were the main culprit behind the genocide that took place in this district. As the Pakistani army faced resistance from the freedom fighters at various places on their way to Noakhali, their main objective was to punish the freedom fighters and their allies. For this purpose, with local people who were against the spirit of the liberation war, they formed the Rajakar forces (collaborators of Pakistani army). Through these razakars Pakistani army used to collect information about the positions and activities of the freedom fighters (Interview: Samsu uddin).

Sreepur is a village near Sonapur in Sadar upazila of Noakhali district. Sreepur village is located on the left hand side to go to Sonapur from Majidi, the main city of Noakhali. On the side of the road there was a large gathering including the local market. Basically Sreepur was a politically concerned area of that period. Many Awami League and Student League leaders lived in this village. They organized the freedom fighters from different parts of Noakhali. This news knew the collaborators and they informed the Pakistani Army (Interview: Abdul Hossain). On 15 June in 1971 at mid-afternoon (about 2 p.m to 4 p.m) the truck and lorries loaded with Pakistani army arrived at the entrance of Sreepur from Begumganj Technical camps. They divided them into three groups. One group entered the west side of Sreepur, another group entered around the Moktarbari and the other group entered in the north of Karimpur. The first attack was on the west side of Sreepur. At the sound of gunfire, people started running in panic. On that day, Pakistani army killed about 110-120 people on the spot. The genocide lasted for about two hours. They searched a number of houses, beat the people, set fire to the house and raped many women (Daily Jugantor).

Freedom fighter Fazlul Haque Badal said, *'There was the unwavering support of the people of these villages towards the war of liberation. At the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, most of the youth of Sreepur, Sonapur and central Karimpur took part in the liberation war. Earlier, the freedom fighters looted the district government arsenal. Their looted weapons were stored in this area in the southern part of the district and from here the weapons were delivered to the freedom fighters in the eastern part of the district as a transit route. With all of this information to the Pakistani forces, the Razakars have caused this heinous incident. Besides, the people of the area had active participation in every movement against the government of Pakistan. So, after the beginning of the liberation war, the Pakistani*

army and their allied local razakars were angry with the villages adjoining the Noakhali railway station in the district town' (Interview: Fazlul Haque Badal).

Freedom fighter Shamsur Rahman was an eyewitness of the genocide. He said, *'I was sitting in the market then. In the meantime, I saw the vehicles of the Pakistani army and I hid. A group of Pakistani soldiers shot Mohammad Yasin, Tota Mia and Ali Hossain at the Ahmadiyya Adarsh High School ground. Then they entered Syed Munshi's house at the back of the school and shot Ali Karim, Ali Haider and one of their guests. At that time, their father Syed Munshi hung the Quran around his neck and begged them to save their sons. But the Pakistani army kicked the old man and threw him to the ground. Then they looted and set fire to the house. The Pakistani army then attacked the house of Haji Abdur Bari. At that house, Pakistani forces killed Nur Mohammad and Abdul Rahman. At that time Muhammad Ibrahim Khalil was shot and 4 of their houses were set on fire by Pakistani Army. Then they entered Bacchu Mia's house and killed a man named Akkas and set him and his house on fire with gunpowder'* (Interview: Shamsur Rahman). Pakistani army entered several houses in Karimpur village. There they killed and torture people, set the houses on fire. The Pakistani army came to the near of a Pond and killed some people who had come to bathe. They attacked Abdul Majid Chowkidar's house and killed Md. Humaun Kabir, Sabbir Ahmed, Md. Abul Khair and Chowdhury Mia there. Abdul Khaleq, a local resident, said: *'At that time people came home for lunch after work. Many people were bathing in the pond that day. At around 2pm, the military entered that place and shot 2-3 people who had come to take bath'* (Interview: Abdul Khaleq).

Most of the martyred of this genocide is ordinary people. Pakistani army killed people Akkas Mia is a martyr in the genocide of that day. His son Abul .indiscriminately on that day :Hossain recalled about that day *'My father worked in the field. On June 15 as like other days, after finishing his field work my father took a bath at noon and sat down to eat. Suddenly the sound of gunfire began. Before realizing it, the Pakistani army entered our house, shot and killed my father. My father just sat down to eat. In that situation he was martyred. We hid in the house next with fear. We could not bury my father that day. The next day, some people from the area buried my father'* (Interview: Abul Hossain).



Burial ground of Akkas Mia

In the genocide of that day Abul Kashem Bulu Mia lost his father Aziz Ahmed. Bulu Mia was employed in West Pakistan at that time. After independence, he returned home and did not find his father. He heard from neighbors about the tragic story of his father's killing. With tears in

his eyes, he said, *'My father was a political person of Awami League. He was also involved in anti-Pakistan movements. In the afternoon of 15 June, Pakistani army called my father by the Razakars at our house and shot him first. Then they stabbed him to death with a bayonet. The Pakistani army also shot my uncle. But he jumped into the pond and survived'* (Interview: Bulu Mia).

Fatema Khatun lost her husband in this genocide. She had a happy family with her husband and two sons and a daughter. Recalling that day, she said, *'During the war my husband was a shopkeeper. Like every day, he came home at noon to have lunch. Suddenly Pakistani army and some razakars came to our village. That time, my husband was at home and eating lunch. Pakistani army and some Razakars entered our house. Someone asked me if I was a Hindu or a Muslim. I ran away in fear without saying anything. Then they grabbed my husband and took him out of the house to beat him. Then my husband Abul Khair with Humayun and Sabbir were shot by them'* (Interview: Fatema Khatun). In addition to the genocide, more than 10 women were tortured by the Pakistani Army. Dil Afroza Begum, the eyewitness of the genocide said, *'I lost my older brother and father that day. On that day, after lunch I was talking to my brother, sister and father. Suddenly we heard the sound of gunfire starting in the village and we saw that some people from the next door came to inform us. My father said the armies would not come so far inland. But after a while, the army came to our house. I hid in another room in fear. Some soldiers took my father and brother out of the house and shot them in the pond near the road. And some of them also set fire to our new house with gunpowder. My younger sister was raped by some soldiers. After their leaving, I comforted my sister. I found out later that they had tortured many more women besides our house. But no one says anything for fear of being disrespected'* (Interview: Dil Afroza Begum). Prominent writer Zobaida Nasreen mentions one of the incidents of this genocide in her book. *'At that time, Dr. Abdul Qayyum had a drug store at south Sonapur. There a mother came to the doctor with her sick 2-month-old baby daughter. At that moment, the Pakistani army first shot the doctor, then the mother and child, and burned them with gunpowder. The doctor, mother and child were burnt to ashes'* (Nasrin, 2007).

Findings of Sreepur Genocide: Pakistani army indiscriminately killed people at Sreepur on 15 June 1971. The following characteristics of this genocide are noticed:

1. Although the Pakistani army killed the Bengalis indiscriminately in 1971, they had some specific targets. The Bengali military men, the members of the Hindu Minority Community, the Awami Leaguers, students of colleges and universities, Bengali intellectuals and Freedom fighters were their main targets. Many freedom fighters and local Awami League leaders lived in Sreepur. For this reason, Pakistani army attacked Sreepur and the surrounding villages and carried out brutal genocide.
2. Apart from a few Razakars, everyone else in the village was in favor of the liberation war. The people of the village had already speculated about the attack by Pakistani army and they were always in a panic. They were also determined to protect the freedom fighters from the Pakistani army. They assisted the freedom fighters in various ways. That is why the Pakistani army targeted Sreepur village.

3. Although their main targets were the freedom fighters and Awami Leaguers, they killed people indiscriminately on 15 June. According to eyewitnesses, Pakistani army searched houses asking if they were Hindus or Muslims. From this it is understood that Hindus were one of their targets. On the other hand, we found that Muslims have not been spared from their indiscriminate killings. Many innocent villagers have shown Quran to save their lives, holding it to their chests. But they did not escape from the brutal genocide of the Pakistani army. Even two-month old babies were victims of this genocide. So it is clear that they killed people indiscriminately and the pro-liberation Bengalis were their main target in Sreepur. The villagers were the supporters of the liberation war and assisted the freedom fighters in various ways. For this reason Pakistani army killed whoever was in front of them on that day, especially the youth, because they could join the liberation war.
4. Sreepur genocide was carried out by Pakistani army with the help of their local collaborators (razakars). They collected information about freedom fighter's position in Sreepur village through razakars. These razakars also set fire to houses and looted the houses of the freedom fighters. From the eyewitnesses statements it is found that the local collaborators (razakars) took the Pakistani army from house to house and helped them to carried out genocide-torture. On March 13, 2018 a special tribunal found four Noakhali men guilty of crimes against humanity during the liberation war and sentenced three to death and the other to 20 years imprisonment. All four were members of Razakar Bahini, an auxiliary force of the Pakistani army, in 1971 and worked as aide of Pakistan army in the killing of more than 100 people including two unarmed freedom fighters, under Shudharam Police Station in Noakhali. Of the convicts, Abul Kalam alias AKM Monsur, 67; Amir Ahmed alias Razakar Amir Ali, 70, and Md Joynal Abedin, 73, have been given capital punishment. Abdul Kuddus, 84, got the 20-year jail sentence. Monsur is believed to have fled from the country, while the rest three are behind bars. All of them except Joynal were involved with anti-liberation Muslim League before joining the local Razakar force, of which Monsur was a commander. On June 20, 2016 the tribunal framed three specific charges against four people for their alleged involvement in crimes. The investigators started the probe against the five suspected war criminals on November 16, 2014 and submitted a report before the prosecution on August 31, 2015. Three charges include killing of over 100 people, including 41 of Sonapur and Sreepur villages in Sudharampur on June 15 in 1971 (The Daily Star; Dhaka Tribune).
5. In addition to killing Pakistani army raped women on that day. Local freedom fighters and several eye witnesses confirmed that. However, they didn't disclose their names thinking to protect their social status.
6. Besides killing and rape, Pakistani army and their local collaborators set fire and plundered. They searched houses and shops and took away valuable things.
7. On that day the Pakistani Army set fire to the local market. So, not only the villagers but many of those who came to the market from outside the village were martyred on that day.



This is the local market. On that day, the market was set on fire and many people died.

8. More than hundred people were martyred in the Sreepur genocide but only 40 people have been identified. They are Akass Mia, Abdur Razzak, Abdul Malak, Ali Karim, Ali Haydar, Abdul kayum, Ali Hossain , Abdul Kadar, Abu Taher, Abdur Rahman, Aziz Ahamd, Mojammal Hossain, Mohammad Yeasin, Mojibul Haque Bhuyan, Mohammad Hossan Mahmud, Samsul Haque, Abdur Rob , Dr. Abdul kayum, Nur Mia, Abdul Kalak, Aminul Haque kokon, Mijanur Haldar, Nur Islam Chawdori, HumayunKabir, Abdul Aziz, Abdul Kadar, Abdul Rob, Mohammad Abul, Jaynal Abadin, Golam Rosul, Saydul Haque, Shakawat ullah, Cersol Haque, Abul Kasam, Abul Khayer, Sabbir Mia, Nur Mohammad, Mohi uddin, Dabandra Kumar, Nur Mohammad.
9. After so many years of Independence, people of that time are burdened with age. Much information has been erased from the memory of eyewitnesses. Many of those martyred were outsiders. So the identity of all could not be fully ascertained.
10. All martyrs of Sreepur genocide were farmers, shopkeepers or small businessmen. Most of the martyrs were the only bread earners of their families. Many families became overwhelmed with the loss of a sole bread earner. This has a lasting impact on society. Still many families are carrying the burden and the memory of the pain inflicted upon them by the Pakistani army on June 15, 1971.
11. To preserve the memory of Sreepur genocide, ‘Smriti Amlan’ was formed. 15 June began to be observed as a special day for many years. Locals and families of martyrs pay tribute to the martyrs through various ceremonies on the very day every year. The Freedom fighter Rabiul Hossain kachi, former mayor of Noakhali municipality erected the memorial at Sreepur village to present the history of the genocide of June 15, 1971 to the new generation. There are only 40 martyrs in this memorial.



Monument of Sreepur genocide 'Smriti Amlan'

Conclusion: The Pakistani army continued the brutal genocide for 9 long months with the assistance of their local collaborators. During the liberation war of Bangladesh, Pakistani army carried out brutal genocide in Noakhali district which is a remote area of Bangladesh. Pakistani army killed people indiscriminately across the district. There are more than 30 genocidal places in Noakhali district. Thousands of people were martyred in those genocides. On 15 June, 1971 Pakistani army killed about 110-120 people in Sreepur. They searched a number of houses, beat the people, set fire to the house and raped many women. All of their inhuman activities were led by the helping of local collaborators. Bangladesh has been independent for almost 50 years. But no significant work has been done on genocide. In just 9 months, 3 million people were martyred and more than 2 lakh women were raped. The killing of so many people in such a short time is rare in history. But it is a matter of great regret that the genocide during the time of liberation war has no international recognition. Genocidal research is one of the most important ways to uphold the true history of the liberation war of Bangladesh. And this is the task as well as the challenge of the researchers to present the Bangladesh genocide to the international community.

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