

The Killing at Hariharpara

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Survivors Say 20,000 Bengalis Were Executed

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HARIHARPARA, Bangladesh, Jan. 9

-The survivors are returning to the killing ground.

And the survivors of the killing at Hariharpara are among the luckiest of any who escaped the Pakistani army. For this village near Dacca was not just a scene of brutality. It was an extermination camp.

In one month, April, Pakistani firing squads are reported to have systematically eliminated 20,000 Bengalis here.

According to eye witnesses, this is what happened:

Beginning at sundown each evening, the soldiers dragged the Bengalis, men and women, bound together in batches of six and eight, to the Burhiganga riverfront to be killed.

While their executioners loomed above them on a wooden pier they were made to wade out into knee-deep water. Then the rifles opened up. And the firing and the screaming shattered the hot night air until dawn.

Each morning, village boatmen were forced to bring their high-prowed craft into the bloody water and haul the bodies out to midstream, where they were cut loose to drift downriver.

Victims were brought to Hariharpara by trucks from other villages, from the nearby town of Narayanganj and from the East Pakistani capital of Dacca, eight miles to the north.

Their hands tied behind their backs, they were kept prisoners in a large riverside warehouse of the Pakistan National Oil Company until their time came to die.

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Villagers Say 20,000 Bengalis Were Shot

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Mohammed Masud, the officer in charge of the Fatulla Police District, was one of many local people who witnessed the assassinations. "Each night I would hide in my headquarters," he said, pointing to a small yellow building a hundred yards upstream from the oil-slick pier.

"There is nothing I can tell you that would fully describe the horror of this butchery," said Masud, an articulate, man of 45 with thick gray hair and the demeanor of a school teacher.

"It became a crime to be a Bengali," he went on. "The soldiers would say 'are you a Bengali?' and if you were, you would be killed."

One morning, he said, he saw a thousand bodies heaped in the water before the boatmen came. "There were so many that the Pakistanis never noticed one man who slipped into the water as if dead and then swam quietly upstream to my headquarters. We clothed him and helped him slip away. I think he is still alive."

Masud said there were two Pakistani army officers based at Narayanganj who were in charge of the executions. He identified them as Captains Faiaz and Parvez. "I will never forget them," he said as he pointed to their names in a thick blue ledger.

"The bastards. The bloody bastards."

The special targets of the executioners were members

of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League, students, professional people and others of some accomplishment, Masud said. On April 18, he recalled, Capt. Faiaz ordered him to round up all the Awami Leaguers in Hariharpara for summary execution, or be killed himself.

"I decided I could not do it," he said. "I went home to await my fate. But the bastard never came for me. I suppose he was getting his fill of killing anyway."

Vultures

For three weeks after the mass murders had tapered off, the banks of the river were thick with dogs, vultures and shiney black crows, all gorging on human flesh. "They were so glutted they could not dispose of it all," he said.

While their hate is directed mainly at the Pakistani soldiers, Masud and the villagers reserve a large measure of loathing for a group of enemy within—the 350 Biharis who lived among them.

"My god," said Masud. "The Biharis did everything the soldiers told them to. Kill these people. Catch those. Finger some others. My God, what the Biharis did to us."

The Biharis came to live at Hariharpara in 1947, at the time of Pakistan's partition from India. They were a Moslem minority in the village of a thousand Bengali Hindus. While there were inevitable differences

over the years, the two groups generally lived in peace.

In many parts of the country, the ambitious Biharis have incurred the dislike and envy of the Bengalis through their comparative wealth. But in Hariharpara both groups were equally poor.

The Bengalis lived in tiny split-bamboo and metal-roofed huts while the Biharis lived in a maze of dark, dank apartments in a crumbling brick building on the roadside.

Sitting in one of the cell-like apartments, now used as headquarters by a band of 35 Mukti Bahini guerrillas, Masud and several villagers recalled how the delicate ethnic balance was irretrievably smashed. At about 1 p.m. March 26, just hours after the Pakistani army launched its merciless crack-down in Dacca, about 300 soldiers marched into the village from their camps at two nearby vegetable oil mills and a power plant.

The soldiers gave weapons to the Biharis. Then, together, they began looting Bengali houses. The people scattered in fear but came back after the troops left.

The next day the troops returned. By then, the village's one land-owning family, "our rich family, had fled. The soldiers burst into their house, shot to death a young relative of the family and his friend. "The Biharis had told the soldiers they were there," a villager said.

The killing at Hariharpara had begun. The Bengalis packed their pitifully few belongings and ran from their village. Most of them trekked the 200-miles along muddy roads and over fields to Argatala, an Indian border town, where they were housed in refugee camps.

As the refugees fled from Hariharpara, the soldiers and the Biharis sacked the village, stripping two small brick Hindu temples of everything from a silver image of Lord Krishna to the windows and doors, burning out the only three brick residences and dismantling the 200 huts to sell the bamboo side panels and corrugated roofing sheets. "Our village became a den of the Biharis," said one of the Mukti.

Then, after many months, came the two-week war between the armies of India and Pakistan and the decisive Indian victory which created an independent Bengal nation.

On Dec. 15, a day before the war ended, the Biharis fled from Hariharpara to Bihar colonies at Mohamadpur, Mirpur and the Adamjee jute mill, on the outskirts of Dacca. They are still there, guarded by Indian troops and living in terror of Bengali reprisals.

Refugees Returning

Now the Bengali refugees are returning to Hariharpara. So far about 300 of the original 1,000 have made the trip back from Agartala. Some of them were provided transport and a few supplies by the Indian government and the United Nations. Others returned as they had gone on foot and with almost nothing.

A few—no one seems to know exactly how many—died in the camps and along the treacherous route. Others are afraid to leave the security of the camps for the uncertainty of life in their homelands. The Bangladesh government has given them a small amount of grain for making bread and some men earn a few rupees by working as day laborers in surrounding areas.

The village's neat rice paddies and fields are fallow and untended, the last crop carried off by the Biharis.

Most of those who have come back are living in the ramshackle apartment buildings. Others have been able to scrape together a few materials to rebuild some bamboo huts.

In the open field where their houses used to be there is nothing. The low, rectangular mounds that were the mud floors are grown over with grass, looking like row upon row of graves in an abandoned cemetery.

An old woman dressed in a ragged blue sari gently touched a long bamboo stake jutting from the corner of one of the mounds. "This was my home," she said. Then she wept.