



Pregnant rape victims wait at an abortion clinic in Dacca. During the campaign of terror in Bangladesh, the erstwhile East Pakistan, thousands of women were raped by West Pakistani soldiers. Now many victims have been shunned by their husbands and families.

The New York Times

Published: July 23, 1972

Copyright © The New York Times

The Rapes of Bangladesh

By Aubrey Menen

DACCA: Bangladesh is a green and pleasant land. It is flat, with a dozen rivers snaking their way through it to the sea, watering the fields of jute, making them as emerald as the fields of Ireland, or putting the rice fields under calm pools which throw back a tranquil sky. Among this beauty move a tranquil, soft people, living in villages raised on mounds above the waters. They are poor, but not so very poor, like so many others in the world who are living on an abundant soil. They speak Bengali, a lilting, tripping language, accompanied by delicate gestures. They are small-boned, shy and kindly to a fault. They love their families, they love the land into which they were born. They love peace.

In one such village lived a girl of 17. She was considered the belle of the place for she had fine eyes and classical buttocks; they were shaped, that is, as the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa had prescribed, like two halves of a perfect melon. As became a good daughter, she had married the boy of her father's choice. He had some difficulty in choosing, because there was no boy in the village who would not jump at the chance of marrying her—or so she told me, when I spoke to her. It was the one and only time she smiled during my interview.

Her father's house was the best in the village. It was not built of thatch and wattles. It was made from corrugated iron. When she was married, her husband, as is often the Hindu custom, came to live in her father's house, he having more land than the boy's parents. Her father bought some more corrugated iron and built another room for the bridal pair.

On the morning of Oct. 17 last year, a military truck drove up the one earth road that the village possessed. A group of soldiers jumped out, obeying the orders of a sergeant who spoke in a language nobody in the village could understand. For all that, they knew that they were their own soldiers, and thus had to be obeyed. The village was part of Pakistan and those tall, raw-boned military men were Pakistanis. They spoke so strangely because they came from that part of Pakistan which lay to the West, across a thousand miles of a foreign territory that was called India.

One soldier spoke a little Bengali. He told the villagers who gathered round him not to be frightened. The soldiers were only there to see if anybody was a worker for the traitor Sheik Mujibur Rahman. The villagers knew that the Sheik was the leader of this part of Pakistan and that he was quarreling with the leaders of the other part. More they did not know. Politics was something that spoiled the programs on the one transistor radio in the village, a radio that otherwise gave forth songs (when its owner could afford new batteries)

Aubrey Menen, the novelist, is a frequent contributor to this Magazine.

of which they were inordinately fond and loved to sing in the fields.

The soldiers scattered, each taking a house. They searched for pamphlets but in a quiet, polite way. The Hindu women they encountered drew their saris modestly across their faces, and the soldiers smiled shyly and avoided them. The bride in the corrugated iron house gave her soldier a drink of cool coconut juice. He thanked her. The soldiers took away the brightest boy in the village, a 15-year-old who was going to college. But they said they would bring him back in the evening.

He did not come back. He has never come back. But the soldiers did come back, in the same truck, at 10 o'clock that night. It stopped outside the corrugated iron house. The family inside was sleeping, the three young boys on the floor, the bride and her husband on a bed made of wood and string, her father and grandmother on ancient beds with mattresses of cotton. The soldiers woke them up by kicking down the door. They got the family to its feet, poking them in the ribs with the muzzles of their automatic rifles. They lined them against the wall.

I have made that journey along the single road. I have been in the iron house. I have asked the father:

"Were they drunk?"

"No," he said, "they were not drunk. They did not swear, or spit. They just. . . ." He broke off. Then, knowing I represented this journal, he went on:

"I have been told their guns were American. You can tell me if this is so."

I replied that I could not be sure. They may well have been.

There were six soldiers in all. Two went into the room that had been built for the bridal couple. The others stayed behind with the family, one of them covering them with his gun. They heard a barked order, and the bridegroom's voice protesting. Then there was silence, until the bride screamed. Then there was silence again, except for some muffled cries that soon subsided.

In a few minutes one of the soldiers came out, his uniform in disarray. He grinned to his companions. Another soldier took his place in the extra room. And so on, until all the six had raped the belle of the village. Then all six left, hurriedly. The father found his daughter lying on the string cot unconscious and bleeding. Her husband was crouched on the floor, kneeling over his vomit.

These details I know because the father told me. He wanted you who are reading this to know. I talked to the bride, but not in the corrugated iron hut. I met her in a large, comfortable house in the capital city. She had a room of her own, a Western bed with a thick mattress and jars of flowers everywhere. There were, it is said, 10,000 other women like her. When the horror was over and that green and smiling land had become a free, independent nation, she and the others had been declared Heroines of the Nation. Fortunately that

did not remain a piece of rhetoric. Solid citizens, shocked into action, had offered their homes to the raped women—those, that is, who lived. Institutions took others.

She was, indeed, beautiful. Her eyes were soft and even humorous in the Bengali manner. Only her mouth was strange. It did not seem to belong to her face. It was hard and tense. When she spoke it would sometimes go into a lightning twist. Why was she here, in Dacca?

"These kind people," she said, pointing to my hosts who were there in the room with me, "these kind people brought me."

"Do you like the big city?"

She shrugged. She looked vacantly at the flowers.

"These kind people," she began again, but I interrupted.

"Would you have rather stayed in your village?"

She shook her head. The lady of the house said some words to her which she did not translate. It seemed that she was encouraging her to talk. Her mouth twisted.

"They did not want me," she said.

"The villagers?"

"Yes." She paused. "And my father was. . . ." She broke off.

"Ashamed?" prompted the lady of the house.

"Yes."

There was a silence in the room.

"I'm afraid," said the lady of the house, "it is true. The whole family feels it has been disgraced."

"By her?" I said, incredulously.

"By fate," said the lady of the house. "By destiny. We Hindus believe greatly in destiny."

I turned back to the girl.

"Your husband—has he come to see you?"

"No. He is ill."

I glanced at my hostess. She looked at the ground with an expression of resignation.

"We must try to understand," she said. "It was a terrible thing to happen. These poor people have no precedent to guide them. We Hindus need precedents very much."

"Will you ever go back to the village?" I asked the girl.

She looked up. A fierce pride suddenly blazed in her eyes.

"I do not need to. I work here with these kind people."

"That is very good," I said. "I am sure you will be happy here. And you will forget—" I was at a loss for words, but she nodded, obediently.

I took my leave. I was at the door when she called me back.

"Huzoor," a title of honour.

"Yes?"

"You will see that those men are punished," she said. "Punished. Punished. Punished."

Not all showed this reluctance to talk. There were others I met who seemed to find some consolation in telling me what had happened to them. They wished, I felt, to see themselves in others' eyes:

(Continued on Page 24)

The Rapes

(Continued from Page 11)
to be reassured they had behaved as well as could be expected of them.

There was a mother of two children in a clinic in Calcutta, a city to which, with millions of others, she had fled for refuge. I do not know her name. Like most of the others I met, her identity was concealed by a number. "They raped me several times," she said, quite firm in voice and manner, as though she were reporting to the police. "They made my husband watch. But he swore at them—terrible names that I did not even know he knew. So they killed him with bayonets. When they had left I took a rope and put it round my neck to kill myself. But I heard my children crying. I took them and put them in our cart next morning and joined a great crowd of

refugees like myself. I did not speak for a week." She and the children are safe, though she is ill with an internal malfunction that was not described to me in more explicit terms.

There were those that did not suffer, but only saw, and it is they that feel the most guilt. An old woman in another Bangladesh village spoke and spoke to me about what had happened, telling the story over and over again, until tears came so fast they silenced her: a relief, I think, that she was seeking.

The village was on a main through road, rare in Bangladesh. Her granddaughter, aged 13, was waiting for a bus to take her to school. A jeep full of soldiers arrived. They leaped out, seized the child, and carried her off into a plantation. Her grandmother, who had seen what had hap-

pened, ran frantically after them. But she stopped, frozen with fear, behind some bushes. The soldiers raped the girl several times, then shot her.

"I did nothing," said the old woman. "I should have saved her."

I assured her that had she tried to do so, she would not have been alive to tell the tale. Perhaps, I said, she would one day tell it in a court of justice and the men would get their just deserts. I did not believe myself, but she did, and it consoled her.

But there came a time when I found my mind was growing numb with stories of lust and butchery. I felt, in the hot and humid air of Bangladesh, that I, too, was beginning to accept things as inevitable. Was there any explanation, save that of the depravity of human nature? I put the question to a political activist, a sober man of 40, who had done much to bring the disaster about, and was now rebuilding his country.

We talked, bizarrely, in a luxurious hotel in Dacca, with



Bangladesh refugees in Calcutta sing their national anthem. The occasion: India's recognition of their country last December.

a youthful rock group playing—and playing well—songs of protest from everywhere but Bangladesh. "There most certainly is an explanation, but I don't know if it isn't as disconcerting as the facts. The rape of Bangladesh was a calculated military maneuver made by a trained soldier who

came within an ace of winning."

We were served martinis. The group played Bob Dylan.

"From the very beginning, when Pakistan was founded, the West Pakistanis treated us, of East Pakistan, as colonials. It was logical. We had the raw materials—jute, rice

—you've seen for yourself, the countryside drowns in them. They, in the West, had very little. But they held the reins of government — like Whitehall, for instance, in the days of the British Raj. Pakistan is a developing country, to use the catch phrase, but West Pakistan had no intention of letting us develop. And, as you know, I think they would have got away with it. We Bengalis are a mild, peaceful lot, until we're roused. And what roused us was our language."

The band played the Beatles. I felt my thoughts wandering. So many Indians have the art of reducing an urgent, human question to an abstraction. With Bengali subtlety, he divined my thoughts. "No," he said, "I'm not talking politics. I'm talking of the cause of those terrible things you have heard. In a way, it is grotesque. Pakistan is a Moslem state. The language of the Koran is Arabic. Urdu, the language of West Pakistan, is a near approach to Arabic. It is written in those curly characters, with dots and so on. But we speak Bengali, which is quite different. That wouldn't do for West Pakistan. We had to speak and write Urdu. Not even the Nazis in World War II tried to make the French speak German. We protested. We formed a movement. We made six demands which, while keeping us in Pakistan, would have preserved our Bengali identity. Yahya Khan decided to crush us."

Yahya Khan was the now deposed head of state in Pakistan. I said that I had gathered that he was considered a blundering fool.

"Was he?" asked my friend. "I wonder. He lost, yes. But he might not have. You see—and now I come to your point—he decided to destroy the Bangladesh movement by unleashing a campaign of terror. It is a cheap way of fighting a war, and Pakistan hasn't much money."

"And a campaign of terror includes rape?" I said.

He pursed his lips.

"A campaign of terror includes such things as Dresden and Hiroshima," he said.

I do not remember what number the rock group played at that point. I recall we both heard it through in silence.

"But those boys who did these things. Have you an explanation for that?"

"Yes. They were soldiers.

What do soldiers talk about in barracks? Women and sex. What do they look for when they go out of barracks on liberty? Women and sex. Put a gun in their hands and tell them to go out and frighten the wits out of a population and what will be the first thing that leaps to their minds? Sex. Remember, some of our Bengali women are very beautiful."

My thoughts went back to the past. Moslems and Hindus had fought one another for centuries. But they had been wars of men against men, not men against women. Moreover, they had been fought, usually if not always, with a code as rigid, on both sides, as that of medieval chivalry. Moslems and Hindus alike had always held the chastity of women in the highest esteem, the Moslems to the point of making their wives and daughters wear veils in public, the Hindus celebrating the purity of a wife as the central theme of their religious epic, "The Ramayana." Perhaps it was this very fact, working in the minds of simple soldiers free to do as they pleased, that had brought about this unprecedented catastrophe.

They were turning out the lights. We walked out from the air-conditioning into a sultry, tropical night.

"Yahya's plan worked so well that 10 million people fled the country. It would have worked all the way if it had not been for one woman knowing her own mind. Indira Gandhi saw what she had to do and she did it. She sent in her troops and in six days we were all sane again. But without that remarkable woman. . . ." He paused, shook his head, and said goodnight.

He had been very calm. But he was not so calm as Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa is an Albanian who has worked in India for 40 years. I knew her by name. She is a Catholic, and often when I went to the Vatican Palace, the prelates would say that if I went to India, I should visit her, it being always interesting (they said) to meet a person who was certain to become a saint.

I went to see her in her small, bare mission in Calcutta. My excuse was that she had been the first to help the raped women, opening five houses in Bangladesh to shelter them. There are

now over 60 rehabilitation centers in Bangladesh, but in the early days the brand-new Government did very little; Mother Theresa led the way. Her women helpers, in white saris with a pale blue border, came and went and spoke to me. Soon, a short woman in the same uniform stood silently beside me and at first I thought she was another assistant. Then I saw her face—no, rather her eyes—and I knew who she was.

She is middle-aged. Her face is worn. But her eyes are young. They are tranquil: they are shot with humor. I have seen those eyes only in two other people. Pope John XXIII, and Mahatma Gandhi.

She began her mission in Calcutta by caring for the aged and dying who had been abandoned by their relatives. She succored and comforted them in their last moments. From that grim and Christian act she had gone on with her works of charity until she had become an Indian legend.

She brushed aside my compliments that she had been the first in Bangladesh. "There are thousands at work now," she said. Then, surprisingly, and very calm: "It was a good thing to happen. The Bengali is kind; at least he means to be kind. But it needed something like this to shake him into action. Men and women came forward in hundreds to help. I think the tragedy of their fellow men has changed them. Do you know, we have had young men offering to marry these poor women?"

"Mother Theresa," I asked, "have any of them done so?"

"Not yet," she said. "You see, we have the babies. Many of the women are pregnant. So we must wait."

For these pregnant women, Government facilities are available for abortions, but this practice is still not accepted by orthodox society, and no pressure of any sort is brought upon the women to leave the ways of their community. Most of these babies will see the light of day.

Mother Theresa looked for a long moment through the window, then turned back to me. "What we need now is forgiveness. People still say, 'You did this to us. We're going to do it to you.'"

Some, I knew, had taken revenge.

"The people tell me," she went on, "that all they want is peace. But without forgiveness, they will never have it." ■

The New York Times

Published: July 23, 1972

Copyright © The New York Times