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BOOK REVIEW

Witness to Carnage 1971

Author: Brig Karrar Ali Agha, (R)

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The book *Witness to Carnage 1971*, authored by Brigadier Karrar Ali Agha, provides a comprehensive analysis of the East Pakistan insurgency. The book delves into two key dimensions of the insurgency, namely the historical context and the detailed account of the execution of Operation Searchlight. The author was posted to the East Pakistan Rifles, where he acquired significant knowledge regarding the Bengal insurgency and the political environment. The author presents a primary source account of the Bengali insurgency and sheds light on previously undisclosed information that challenges the propaganda and popular narrative regarding the actions of the Pakistan Army. The author challenges the conventional view of genocide and rape perpetrated by the Pakistan Army. The author refers to an incident involving a journalist who was tasked with addressing misinformation fueled by Indian propaganda by conducting on-ground assessments in Bengal. However, the journalist was clearly not interested in performing his professional duties due to his concerns about his safety. Later, the journalist proceeded to author a firsthand account detailing the

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genocide and instances of rape perpetrated by the Pakistan Army. The author states “He simply picked up some juicy scandals from the Indian Media, packaged them as an eyewitness and sold them to a world hungry for authoritative, firsthand accounts” (308). The author further asserts “Throughout this crisis, India had been having a field day winning the propaganda war. They had set up a very effective campaign and in the absence of any strong response from Pakistan; the Indian propaganda was the only information”(307). Pakistan experienced the repercussions of expelling foreign journalists, as they resentfully relied on Indian propaganda.

The author additionally explores active Indian involvement as a disruptive factor in countering insurgency. Evidence of secret meetings between Mujib and Indian officials as early as July 1963 suggests that this insurgency’s initial phase started way before one could assume. Exploiting the prevailing unrest in East Pakistan, India passed a resolution urging Pakistan to take necessary measures stating “transfer power to the legally elected representatives of people of East Bengal” (364). The Bengali armed personnel, upon seeking refuge in India, proceeded to establish a resistance movement that was divided into six sectors. Additionally, they established a political government in exile that served as a uniting political entity. India displayed complete dedication towards supporting the Bengali independence movement by launching the training of a guerrilla force named Mukti Bahini. Mujib Bahini, a parallel force to Mukti was under the immediate control of Indian authorities. The Indian authorities exercised close monitoring and regulation over the struggle for independence in Bengal.

The author conducts an in-depth analysis of the historical context surrounding Bengali nationalism, revealing its deeply rooted nature. The author asserts that Bengali nationalists existed before the partition and brought up the issue of language. The individuals possessed desires for greater Bengal. The province-wide general strike that proved to be successful before Mr. Jinnah's visit, and the subsequent meeting between Mr. Jinnah and members of the student action committee that resulted in a tense stalemate, highlights the deeply rooted nature of this insurgency. The issue of Bengal nationalism had been in existence for a considerable period

before it was acknowledged. The regions of East Pakistan and West Pakistan exhibited notable differences in cultural practices, language as well as historical and social backgrounds. However, the religious factor overtook cultural connections. It led the Bengali population to overwhelmingly vote (96.7%) in favor of Pakistan. An additional factor was the concern about economic dominance by the Hindu majority in the Indian Subcontinent. Over time, religious emotions were diminished and substituted by a strong belief in ethnic identity.

The author describes several mistakes committed by General Yahya Khan, including the unilateral abandonment of the principle of parity without utilizing it as a bargaining tool, dissolving a unit in West Pakistan during a crucial period, and causing political instability by instigating political parties to form a common front against Punjab while adopting an avoidance strategy with Mujib. The decision to initially delay and subsequently postpone the national assembly session without a set date was a significant error. As previously stated by Mujib, “I will not make an issue out of it, provided I am given a fresh date. It is very hard for me to handle extremists within my party. If the new date is sometime next month (March). I will be able to control the situation. If it is in April, it will be rather difficult. But if it is an indefinite postponement, it will be impossible (110).” Despite the concerted efforts of various parties and military offices, negotiations between Mujib and Bhutto proved unsuccessful. Mujib clearly expressed that “Our struggle this time is the struggle for freedom.” The term "State of Bangladesh" is used for East Pakistan. Also reversing it as “Confederation of Pakistan raised serious concerns keeping in view the intensity of the political situation.”

According to the author, the Army High Command kept on nursing the belief that Yahya would be able to negotiate a political solution and remained in a state of wishful thinking (179). In contrast, the Awami League did not endorse such a perspective and instead maintained readiness for all possible outcomes, including a peaceful transfer of power, armed resistance within Bangladesh, and armed resistance from Indian territory. The author asserts, “Operation Searchlight, launched by the Federal forces, barely pre-empted the Awami League strike just by a few hours (187).” The

operation took place in major cities where Army units were mainly located like Dacca, Khulna, Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore, Rajshahi, Saidput, and Sylhet. The author proceeds to describe the operational activities that occurred in the previously mentioned cities.

The author additionally references various instances of bloodshed and violence perpetrated against both the non-Bengali populace and armed personnel. These events highlight the most inhumane aspects of human conduct and exceed all boundaries. Bengali officers and soldiers perpetrated acts of murder, rape, and looting against unarmed Bengali civilians, as well as West Pakistani officers and their families. Bengali doctors killed patients from West Pakistan and subsequently extracted their blood. Nevertheless, a significant number of Bengalis refrained from engaging in said actions and instead rescued numerous families from West Pakistan and Bihar. The Bengali armed personnel displayed a shift in their loyalties as evidenced by their perpetration of a massacre against their colleagues and their families from West Pakistan. The defection of Bengali armed personnel was not disclosed to the media to preserve the image. It is evident in the following extract from Brig Salik mentioned by the author “Do you want to destroy the image of the finest Army by telling the world that its discipline has collapsed (231).” The book establishes the chronicle of East Pakistan from March 1971 till May 1971, with a primary emphasis on the historical context and Operation Searchlight. The text delves into a comprehensive historical analysis, eventually transitioning to a description of the political climate that set up the stage of operation searchlight. The successful implementation of Operation Searchlight resulted in the establishment of effective control over the Bengal region. However, this event did not mark the conclusion of the crisis. It served as a precursor to a more significant calamity that reached its climax when Dhaka fell which served as a founding location of the Muslim League. On December 16th, 1971, it is the darkest chapter of Pakistan’s history and its contents will always be written with blood.