

Aubrey Menen

## **The Rapes of Bangladesh**

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) 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.”

“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: 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 happened, 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 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 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."

*New York Times, 23 July 1972*

## **THE LONG ROAD TO INDIA**

**CLARE HOLLINGWORTH of the Daily Telegraph.**

**There is famine in East Pakistan. 8 million people are homeless refugees in their own land, wandering, looking for India.**

There are today over eight million displaced people inside East Pakistan—men, women and children hungry and homeless, 'refugees' in their own country.

Groups of villagers are wandering around looking for India, often going in the wrong direction, in a stunned and vague manner. But there is little doubt that a large proportion of these miserable people will cross the border in the hope of obtaining food and shelter in a refugee camp.

The vast majority left their homes in a blind panic when they heard gunfire or saw the next house or the next village set alight by West Pakistan soldiers as a reprisal for an act of terrorism by the Mukti Foj-Bangla Desh liberation army.

Some of the women instinctively picked up a few pots and pans or a bag of rice as they rushed into the protective marshland. With luck some of the men had a few coins in their pockets, which were quickly spent. These roaming people keep well away from the main routes frequented by the army. Indeed the sound of an army jeep causes all the able-bodied to dive into the nearest undergrowth. Sometimes the wanderers take possession of an uninhabited village but they are too frightened to appeal to the local authorities for food. They believe with some reason that it is the army that has the real power and requests for help will merely cause the arrest of some of the younger men and women.

Owing to floods, a chronic shortage of boats, and the havoc the Mukti Foj have caused to the railways and roads, these pathetic

groups of wanderers are not easy to trace except in those areas where there are Christian missions or European workers.

It is difficult to say how many of them die on their way to India but at least, according to some doctors, one fifth. The groups I have seen certainly showed advanced signs of malnutrition.

These displaced wanderers urgently need clothes and medical services but it is difficult to know how this can be arranged until they arrive in India except by sending supplies to those few missions still working in East Pakistan and urging the United Nations to put pressure on the Pakistan Government to allow relief workers to distribute food. At present the Pakistan Government have agreed to allow a totally inadequate handful of observers to see that the gift food reaches the right mouths. Food is a political weapon and as it grows more scarce the "good guys" who are members of the peace committees set up by the Pakistan army are likely to feed their political supporters.

The "bad guys" who have not demonstrated in favour of a united Pakistan and are therefore believed to have some sympathy with Bangla Desh can count on rough treatment except in those limited areas where the army has established an efficient civil administration.

Many hundreds of thousands of people are already suffering from the pangs of hunger in their own homes when there is still plenty of rice in the nearby village market; but they have no purchasing power owing to the breakdown of economic life. Growers have not been able to sell their jute and men have been laid off work on development projects as a result of the civil war. Again, the impartial distribution of relief is urgent, otherwise hundreds of thousands more miserable people will leave the familiar shelter they have and take the road to India.

The only way to save thousands, perhaps millions, of lives is to begin the relief operation. Famine cannot be avoided when the autumn rice crops have been consumed as the population will eat two million more tons of rice and grain each month than the amount now avail-able. The problem is largely one of transport for at

present food stocks are building up at the major ports and there are no trains and far too few vessels and lorries to distribute it. What is urgently needed are powered river boats and trucks with the authority to use them to carry grain to those areas not on the well-known main routes from the capital.

At the moment the Pakistan army has absolute priority and lorry loads of grain can be kept waiting at one of the many ferries for hours. It is only fair to add that every terrorist act of the Mukti Foj causes additional dislocation and suffering for the Bengalis.

Dramatic measures such as air lifts or air drops of food may be essential in an urgent action to save life when the famine begins towards the end of this year but this is not a realistic manner to feed some fifty to seventy million people.

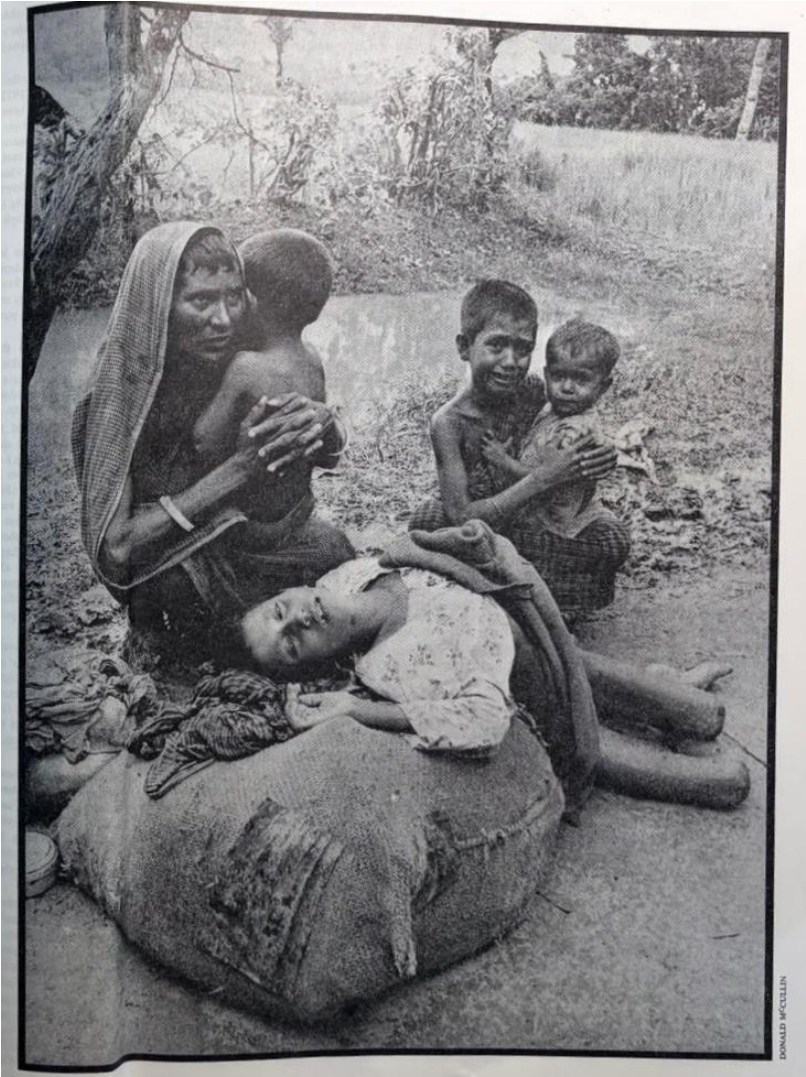
Unhappily too many families are split and the man who is forced to keep his shop open in Dacca or Chittagong has frequently sent his wife and children off to relations in the country little realising the greater danger there. Indeed, it is estimated that the urban population has been reduced by more than a half.

But this is not a question of figures. I recall in a flooded area only ten miles away from Dacca seeing a queue of half-naked people waiting outside a reed hut to obtain clothes and a ticket for a daily rice ration from a Catholic priest. I talked with one woman who had five small hungry children. She told me her husband had been killed earlier in the fighting. Her Basha- reed home-had been suddenly burnt by the Pakistan soldiers. She only had time to pick up the sleeping children before the flames enveloped their home. That was why she had no clothes, nothing. Her story could be repeated thousands of times.

There was no Pakistan Government assistance or help available even though a railway line was functioning within a mile of this spot and had it not been for the priest, the widow and her five children would have died.

Urgent relief is also required by the thirty thousand people who escaped from East Pakistan over the frontier into Burma. No foreign

visitors have been allowed to visit them but Burmese doctors told me their plight was appalling.



*Refugees of 1971. Photographer : Don McCullin*