Jallad

Jallad

Death Squads and State Terror in South Asia

Tasneem Khalil

First published 2016 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3571 1 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3570 4 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7837 1693 7 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1695 1 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1694 4 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England
Text design by Melanie Patrick

Simultaneously printed in the European Union and United States of America

CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION: AFTER THE COLONY

jallad noun (Hindi, Urdu, Bengali): executioner, hangman

There were the military quarters, the cantonment, and then the civilian quarters. Amritsar in 1919 was a city with a population of 160,000 – home to the Golden Temple, the holiest site of Sikhism. The old walled city with its dark and narrow streets where the natives lived in their dingy houses, stood in strong contrast with the spacious British cantonment located just outside the walls with its wide boulevards lined with trees. Residents of this part of the city were the colonial masters of Punjab, India. The colonial city was a city cut in two.[1]

Few more than 300 officers and soldiers of the British Indian Army were stationed in Amritsar at that time. They were the administrators of the British Raj, specialists on colonial domination, control and repression. And in 1919 they were dealing with a crisis of disobedience across Punjab since Mohandas Gandhi announced his first call for *satyagraha* opposing the draconian Rowlatt Act – 'a black law', as he described it.[2]

The Imperial Legislative Council in London passed the act in March 1919. It was designed to empower the Raj in imposing a permanent state of emergency in the colony, to deal with public unrest or rebellion. Emergency provisions granted by the act were: preventive detention of suspects without trial for up to two years; arrest and search without a warrant; in camera, juryless trials with an unusually low burden of proof; and stricter control and

censorship of the press.[3] '[The act is] so restrictive of human liberty that [it] must be resisted to the utmost,' wrote Gandhi.[4]

And the Indians tried resisting. This movement of resistance against the Raj was at its fiercest in Punjab. Accordingly, the Raj assigned one of its top commanders to deal with the trouble. Brigadier General Reginald Dyer arrived in Amritsar and took command of the British garrison, which by then was reinforced with additional troops. More than 1,000 soldiers of the British Indian Army were now guarding the city gates.

And within these gates, a massacre took place on 13 April 1919. That day, in the afternoon, a group of protesters were holding a public meeting against the Rowlatt Act inside Jallianwala Bagh, a walled garden near the Golden Temple. Also present in the garden were pilgrims who had come to Amritsar to celebrate *Baisakhi* (the Sikh New Year) and children from nearby houses. When General Dyer was informed about the meeting, he took it as a serious act of disobedience by the Indians – an act of disobedience and rebellion against a military proclamation which he had issued earlier, banning all public gatherings in the city. In order to retaliate, he organised a special force of 90 soldiers – 50 riflemen and 40 Gurkhas (mercenary soldiers from Nepal) armed with *khukuris* (Nepalese daggers). The soldiers marched towards Jallianwala Bagh, led by their general.

When Dyer and his troops entered Jallianwala Bagh, they saw a sea of people listening to Pandit Durga Das, editor of the newspaper *Waqt*, speaking against the Rowlatt Act. What happened next was described by Nigel Collett, Dyer's biographer:

> Without any warning to the crowd, Dyer gave the order to fire. The order was repeated by Captain Crampton, whistles rang out and immediately the troops opened fire. Havoc ensued. [...] The firing continued for between ten and fifteen minutes. The noise in the Bagh was a cacophony of rifle crack, bullets thumping into flesh and walls, ricochets screeching off the brickwork, the screams of 25,000 people in terror and the cries of the wounded. [...] The sight was one of horror. The vast crowd staggered aimlessly; the air filled with dust and blood; flesh flew

> everywhere; men and children fell with limbs broken, eyes shot out, internal organs exposed.[5]

Hundreds died, thousands were injured – many of them crippled for life. We will never know the exact numbers. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was one of the bleakest chapters in the history of British colonialism in India and Reginald Dyer was its author.[6] It was also one of the earliest precedents of cold-blooded execution without trial in South Asia, carried out in broad daylight by a military unit. And for this sheer act of military brutality, the general was celebrated as a hero by some of his countrymen. 'The saviour of Punjab,' they called him when the news of the massacre made headlines in London and became the subject of a parliamentary debate at the House of Commons.[7] When he died in 1927, a conservative British newspaper published an obituary titled 'The man who saved India.'[8]

In 1983, another group of saviours started roaming the streets of Punjab. This time they were not British but Indian military and police officers, deployed by the central government in a series of counter-insurgency operations against secessionist Sikh militants. During these operations, which ended in 1993, at least three black laws were in force.[9] The National Security Act of 1980/1984 granted preventive detention of suspects without charge or trial for up to one year. The Punjab Disturbed Areas Act of 1983 imposed a de facto state of emergency and empowered the security forces to shoot to kill. They were also granted blanket immunity from prosecution for abuses. The Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Powers Act of 1983 granted commissioned and non-commissioned army officers the power to use deadly and disproportionate force against civilians. It also granted them blanket immunity.

What happened during the decade-long counter-insurgency operation was described by Patricia Gossman of Human Rights Watch:

> [The] insurgency in the north Indian state of Punjab and the brutal police crackdown that finally ended it cost more than 10,000 lives.

> Most of those killed were summarily executed in police custody in staged 'encounters.' These killings became so common, in fact, that the term 'encounter killing' became synonymous with extrajudicial execution. Many civilians were also murdered in militant attacks. Hundreds of Sikh men also disappeared at the hands of the police, and countless more men and women were tortured. [...] [The] counter-insurgency operation that ultimately crushed most of the militant groups by mid-1993, represented the most extreme example of a policy in which the end appeared to justify any and all means, including torture and murder. It was a policy that had been long advocated by senior police officials, in particular Director General of Police KPS Gill, who has had overall authority for counter-insurgency operations.[10]

The anthropologist Joyce Pettigrew wrote about the use of death squads in these operations:

> Special police operations were a part of overall counter-insurgency policy. Extralegal groups operating on behalf of the state engaged in the abduction of the following categories of person: political activists; persons suspected of having association with them; lawyers who defend families whose human rights have been violated; journalists who write about such violations; and human rights workers who record their complaints. [...] The initial act of abduction sets in train a process of illegal custody and torture which often culminates in an extrajudicial execution. [...] Persons can be picked up and detained in a range of situations: by men in unmarked cars or jeeps, but also in raids, in CRPF [Central Reserve Police Force] or commando operations, in police-army combing operations, or as a consequence of counter-insurgency operations that have been conducted in specific areas. The identity of the abduction group varies.[11]

Kanwar Pal Singh Gill, the police chief who oversaw the nightmarish campaign of torture, execution and disappearance in Punjab, was celebrated as the 'super cop' and awarded the *Padmashree* (India's

fourth highest civilian award) in 1989.[12] Many Indians, of course, admired him – Rahul Chandan, Gill's biographer, compared him to great military leaders like Ulysses Grant, Dwight Eisenhower and Bernard Montgomery; a former minister, Vilasrao Deshmukh of the Indian National Congress, compared him to statesmen like Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt; another former minister, Arun Shourie of the Bharatiya Janata Party, described him as 'the one man who saved Punjab for India'.[13]

In 1971, another group of saviours were dealing with a crisis of disobedience in East Pakistan. These were the military rulers of Pakistan, who once served the British Raj as officers in the British Indian Army. Until the end, they remained loyal soldiers and servants of the empire. With the partition of India in 1947, they became the saviours of a new country.[14] Pakistan was a country cut in two: West Pakistan where Punjabis were the dominant political group; and East Pakistan where Bengalis were in the majority. Between these two parts was another country – India, colonial sibling and arch-rival. In the geography of new colonialism, West Pakistan was the centre and East Pakistan was the periphery.[15] And in 1971, the Bengali nationalists of East Pakistan were revolting. They wanted to break free from the rule of the West Pakistani generals.

The leader of the nationalists was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (popularly known as Mujib). By demanding greater political, economic and cultural freedom for East Pakistanis, Mujib led his party, the Awami League, to a landslide victory in the national elections of 1970. The rulers in West Pakistan, however, were refusing to accept the results of the elections. This refusal resulted in a prolonged political stand-off between Mujib and the president of Pakistan, General Yahya Khan – a former officer of the British Indian Army and a veteran of the Second World War.[16]

As the political stand-off dragged on, East Pakistan became the site of a full-blown crisis by March 1971. On 7 March, Bengali nationalists organised a massive rally in Dhaka, the provincial capital. At this rally, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman launched a mass movement of civil disobedience. As his speech made it very clear, the Bengalis were ready to secede from Pakistan.[17] With this speech, the writ

of the central government disappeared from East Pakistan. Bengali government employees walked out of their offices; schools, colleges and universities closed down *sine die*; thousands of protesters came out on the streets across the province; and eventually, small clashes between protesters and army units broke out in some places.[18]

With great attention, two outside observers were watching the events unfolding in East Pakistan – Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the president of the United States and his national security adviser. Pakistan was a key US ally during the Cold War and they were discussing the possible next move by General Yahya Khan, their friend and protégé. 'Rahman has embarked on a Gandhian-type non-violent, non-cooperation campaign which makes it harder to justify repression [and] the West Pakistanis lack the military capacity to put down a full-scale revolt over a long period,' Kissinger wrote in a secret memo to Nixon on 13 March 1971.[19]

A few days later, to quell the Bengali rebellion in East Pakistan, General Yahya Khan ordered a military crackdown, code-named Operation Searchlight – a quick and brutal show of military power aimed at wiping out the Awami League from East Pakistan and teaching the Bengalis a lesson that they would remember for generations to come.[20] The president, Yahya Khan, assigned one of his top commanders to lead the operation, General Tikka Khan – another former officer of the British Indian Army and a veteran of the Second World War.

A little before midnight on 26 March, army convoys started moving out of the barracks and proceeded towards pre-planned targets in major cities in East Pakistan. What ensued was described by the International Commission of Jurists as 'a terrible orgy of killing and destruction, lasting some 48 hours.'[21] In Dhaka, at least three battalions – a mix of armoured, infantry and artillery troops – took part in the carnage.

In the first hour of the crackdown, a special commando unit raided the residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and arrested him. A few hours later, he was flown out of Dhaka for imprisonment in West Pakistan. Other senior leaders of the Awami League, however, managed to flee from their homes and elude arrest.

As the commandos took Mujib into custody, three companies of soldiers marched into the Dhaka University campus. The university was the heart and brain of the Bengali non-cooperation movement and Pakistani generals saw it as the headquarters of Bengali traitors. One after another, three residential student halls were attacked with rocket launchers, mortars, recoilless rifles, machine guns and other heavy weapons. Hundreds of students were ruthlessly slaughtered inside the halls before the buildings were set on fire. Some troops moved into the residential quarters of the teaching staff. Their commanding officers were carrying hit lists with names of people targeted for execution. At least ten university professors were dragged out of their flats and shot dead. Their bodies were then thrown into a mass grave, along with the bodies of the students.

In other parts of the city, troops attacked Bengali policemen and members of the paramilitary East Pakistan Rifles (EPR). Though these groups offered armed resistance in different locations, especially at their barracks, they were very quickly overpowered. While some managed to escape, most of the policemen and EPR members present in their barracks that night were killed.

Two other areas of the city were also targeted: the old part of Dhaka and the slum areas. In old Dhaka, troops raided street after street and dragged out Hindus from their homes. Within just a few hours, thousands of Hindus were machine-gunned to death as their houses were set on fire. In the slum areas, troops carried out what they called 'slum clearance operations', in which whole streets and localities were set on fire and people sleeping in their ramshackle bamboo huts or by the roadside were indiscriminately killed. While the attacks on police stations and EPR barracks were carried out partly due to military necessity, Hindu neighbourhoods and slum areas were targeted mostly on political grounds – for Hindus and slum dwellers were seen as staunch supporters of the Awami League.[22]

As the initial phase of the crackdown was over in the morning of 26 March, a message from the headquarters congratulating unit commanders across Dhaka was relayed over the army field radio: 'You have saved Pakistan!' – a few hours later in West Pakistan,

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party echoed the message as he declared 'Pakistan has been saved!'[23]

Saving Pakistan required the Pakistan Army to engage in a genocide that killed more than 300,000 Bengalis in nine months, between March 1971 and December 1971 – some estimates put the death toll as high as 3 million. It was one of the most brutal genocides after the Holocaust and the first genocide in the history of post-colonial South Asia.[24] During these nine months, East Pakistan became a laboratory of repression where new and innovative tools of terror were developed and then deployed against a mostly unarmed civilian population.[25]

Here then, we have three executioners-in-chief – Dyer, Gill, Khan – and their soldiers described as saviours for saving India and Pakistan. General Reginald Dyer is also known as the 'Butcher of Amritsar' while many Sikhs describe KPS Gill as the 'Butcher of Punjab'. General Tikka Khan is known both as the 'Butcher of Balochistan' and 'Butcher of Bengal' because of his success in saving Balochistan and failure to save East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. This figure of the butcher is recurrent in the history of South Asia. The butchery here, of course, refers to wanton state terror in the form of military or police brutality. And these men are examples of specialists on violence who act as saviours of the state.

The revolutionary philosopher Frantz Fanon wrote about the place of these specialists on violence in colonial and post-colonial states:

> The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression. [...] [In the post-colonial state] where the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty, the army and the police constitute the pillars of the regime; an army and a police force (another rule which must not be forgotten) which are advised by foreign experts. The strength of the

> police force and the power of the army are proportionate to the stagnation in which the rest of the nation is sunk.[26]

As the pillars or the specialists, the soldiers and the policemen are responsible for saving the regime, the state and the ruling elite. This act of saving involves the systematic use of sheer, brutal violence against a civilian population to achieve a political goal: intimidating, controlling and dominating the population to ensure the state's monopoly on violence. In other words, the state deploys its specialists wherever and whenever its writ is challenged or threatened. This is the logic of state terror – brutal quelling of trouble, disorder, dissent and disobedience through military means.[27]

And through the enactment of black laws the logic of state terror is legitimised or authorised by the state. This legitimisation has two features: dehumanisation through the restriction of human liberty and proclamation of a state of exception. In this state of exception, disturbed areas are demarcated where agents of the state perpetrate otherwise illegal and repugnant acts like torture and extrajudicial execution with impunity. In these disturbed areas, people (political activists, their relatives, lawyers, journalists, human rights workers) are dehumanised because by troubling, opposing, dissenting or disobeying the writ of the state they forfeit their right to live or live in liberty. They become *homo sacer*s (accursed men) – men and women who are no longer covered by legal, civil and political rights; men and women who cease being citizens and become bare lives; men and women who can be abducted; men and women who can be held incommunicado in secret detention facilities; men and women who can be tortured to death.[28]

Where exactly are these disturbed areas? This is a question we need to ask, in order to locate the seed of trouble, disorder, dissent and disobedience. Fanon presented a textual map outlining the geography of colonial and post-colonial repression. He described how the 'the greatest wealth' of the mother country is surrounded by 'the greatest poverty' of the colonies – an image of the prosperous core and the impoverished periphery. This impoverished periphery is most often the site of state terror, the disturbed area.

Marred by socio-economic injustices, these can be entire regions in a country or areas within the metropolis, like Punjab in 1919 or the present-day slums of Mumbai. These are the new colonies of the post-colonial mother country – Punjab or Manipur in India; Balochistan or erstwhile East Pakistan in Pakistan; the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh or the Jaffna Peninsula in Sri Lanka. The trees of trouble, disorder, dissent and disobedience in the disturbed areas grow from the prolonged structural violence or the pervasive socio-economic injustices in these areas. And those in the disturbed areas who try fighting the structural violence or protest against socio-economic injustices are the first group of targets of state terror. These are the political opponents of the state: dissenting intellectuals/activists and armed rebels/insurgents.

Structural violence in the peripheries is also the root cause of the existence and rise of an underclass in the metropolis – the lumpen-proletariat. The lumpenproletariat, Fanon wrote, 'leave the country districts, where vital statistics are just so many insoluble problems, rush towards the towns, crowd into tin-shack settlements, and try to make their way into the ports and cities founded by colonial domination.'[29] 'The pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed and the petty criminal,' then, endanger the security of the new metropolis – Mumbai, Karachi, Dhaka or Colombo. They are the second group of targets of state terror: socio-economic troublemakers in need of weeding out by the state.

The lumpenproletariat, however, can also become the foot soldiers of oppression in the metropolis or the periphery. 'The oppressor,' Fanon wrote, 'who never loses a chance of setting the niggers against each other, will be extremely skilful in using that ignorance and incomprehension which are the weaknesses of the lumpenproletariat.'[30] In South Asia, then, we see the common thug or the petty criminal working as a hired gun for powerful politicians or businessmen. And sometimes the thug or the criminal also becomes a member of vigilante, civilian death squads like Salwa Judum in India or Jagrata Muslim Janata in Bangladesh.

The skilful oppressors or the specialists on violence are the dominant group in what we call the garrison state, a state where