

AIR Spotlight - Operation Searchlight: The Untold Story

AIR Spotlight is an insightful program featured daily on the All India Radio Newsonair. In this program, many eminent panellists discuss issues of importance which can be quite helpful in [IAS exam](#) preparation. In this article, a discussion on the Operation Searchlight.

The Genocide:

- 25th March 1971 is known as the darkest day in the history of the [Bangladesh Liberation War](#).
- The Pakistani Army triggered the heinous ethnic cleansing on the fateful night of 25th March 1971 that is known as 'Operation Searchlight'. The Pakistani Army killed almost 7,000 unarmed innocent Bengalis in one single night.
- 40,000 Pakistani soldiers backed by armours and artillery division were deployed to accomplish the genocide.
- It was a systematic execution of the leading Bengali intellectuals. A number of professors from Dhaka University were killed during the first few days of the War.
- Journalists, doctors, artists, engineers, and writers were rounded up by the Pakistani army and the Razakar Militia in Dhaka. The helpless people were blindfolded and taken to Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Nakhal Para, Rajar Bagh, and other locations in different sections of the city only to be executed.
- The genocide by Pakistan can hardly be compared with any other genocide in the world after the [Second World War](#).
- Approximately 3 million people were killed and around 5 million women were raped.
- Such a number of people have never been killed together in the whole world. But in Bangladesh, it just happened within the duration of nine months.

Background:

- In the Pakistan National Elections of December 1970, the Awami League had received the majority of votes and won an overwhelming victory across Bengali territory.
- On 22nd February 1971, the military generals in West Pakistan took the decision to crush the Awami League and its supporters. It was recognized from the outset that a genocidal campaign would be necessary to eradicate the threats from Bengalis that were demanding basic democratic and human rights.
- The Pakistani Dictator General Yahya Khan designed the plot of genocide in March 1971. Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, the 'butcher of Bangladesh' was given the charge of execution. Major General Rao Farman Ali and Khadim Hussain Raza drew the plans on that very day.
- At the very onset of the day when Yahya Khan's troops moved into Dhaka, all foreign newsmen and correspondents were quarantined. There was a complete blackout of news. Even the Dhaka radio station was closed and no news was broadcast to the outer world.

The attack:

- On the eve of this genocidal campaign, then-president Yahya Khan left Dhaka for Karachi, but Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then president of the Pakistan People's Party, witnessed the operation in

Dhaka where killings and burnings occurred rampantly in which innocent people suffered horrible deaths and torture.

- Yet the very next day, Bhutto, on the eve of his departure, highly appreciated the action of the army and commented: “Thanks to God that Pakistan could have been saved.”
- Captain Shahabuddin Ahmad, a former member of the Mukti Bahini (guerrilla resistance movement of Bangladesh) said the Pakistan army’s premeditated attack on unarmed people in Dhaka spared none.

Targets of the Operation:

- The prime targets of Operation Searchlight were the teachers and students of Dhaka University who were the lifeblood of the resistance movement.
- The dead bodies of the young men were found in the fields, rivers, or near the army camps.
- On 7th October 1971, some army officers raided Ruqayyah Hall girls’ hostel and raped the girls in front of the superintendents.
- Male students were lined outside their dorms and shot execution-style in batches. Other students were made to dig mass graves and bury their friends and after the job was done, they too were shot dead and buried on top of their friends.

Freedom Fighters’ Stories:

- Some Bangladeshi freedom fighters told their stories about how brutally they were tortured by the Pakistani army and the local collaborators who helped them.
- Expressing his disappointment, a famous Bangladeshi historian Muntazir Mamun said that despite the overwhelming evidence, footage of killings, the mass graves, eyewitness accounts, and the factual coverage by the foreign journalists, the Bangladeshi genocide has still not been recognized by the [United Nations](#).
- The Pakistani government, far from issuing an official apology, continues to deny that such atrocities even occurred. The Pakistani government also shows solidarity for the war criminals of 1971 and shields them from prosecution.

Conclusion:

It is the 50th anniversary of the struggle for independence of Bangladesh. The glorious sacrifice of many people enabled the birth of the great nation of Bangladesh. The valour of the freedom fighters will continue to inspire future generations to fight injustice.

Read more Gist of AIR Spotlight [here](#).