



# **The Bangladesh Genocide of 1971**

*Religious Persecution and  
Political Dynamics*



**Hindu American Foundation**  
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# The Bangladesh Genocide of 1971: A Primer

In 1971, East Pakistan sought independence as its own country, due to several long standing factors, including linguistic and cultural repression, economic marginalization, and political disenfranchisement. Despite constituting the majority of the population of Pakistan, ethnic Bengalis in East Pakistan were dominated by the West Pakistani military and civilian elite, who sought to create a cohesive nation unified by Islam and the Urdu language. In the process, they suppressed the Bengali culture and language, which was viewed as closely linked to Hinduism and therefore, a threat to their conception of an Islamic nation.

In retaliation to demands for equal rights and independence by the ethnic Bengalis, the Pakistani military launched Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971 at Jagannath Hall in Dhaka University, a dormitory primarily for religious minorities. The goal of Operation Searchlight was to systematically eliminate the ethnic Bengali secular elite, many of whom were Hindu and were alleged to be providing the ideological fuel for the independence movement. It was believed that by eliminating Bengali Hindus it would annihilate the Bangladesh liberation movement and prevent East Pakistan from becoming an independent country, known now as Bangladesh. For ten months there was a campaign of violence against the ethnic Bengali and Hindu religious communities in East Pakistan. These acts can be classified as genocide as defined by the United Nations Genocide Convention as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” The campaign of violence and atrocities committed were documented in official telegrams from U.S. consulate officers posted in Dhaka to the State Department, through Congressional reports and hearings, and by U.S. reporters on the ground.

## PRESENT DAY BANGLADESH

After waging a war for independence from Pakistan, East Pakistan emerged as a secular democracy known now as Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Liberation War endured

## BY THE NUMBERS

- › The Bangladesh Liberation War: March 25, 1971 - December 16, 1971 (10 months)
- › The Indo-Pakistan War: December 3, 1971-December 16, 1971 (13 days)
- › Date of Pakistan surrender: December 16, 1971
- › Total dead: 2-3 million Ethnic Bengalis, mostly Hindus
- › Victims of gender-based violence: 200,000-400,000 women
- › Displaced: 10 million (in 1971 alone) mostly to India as many were Hindus
- › Over 12 million impacted

for ten months (March 25, 1971 - December 16, 1971) resulting in two million deaths. The cleansing forced displacement of 10 million ethnic Bengalis by the Pakistani army and its collaborators.

While Bangladesh ultimately achieved independence with the assistance of India in December 1971, the humanitarian impact on ethnic Bengalis was and continues to be devastating. Soon after independence, Bangladesh renounced its commitment to secularism by amending their Constitution to reflect a greater role for Islam in the national body politic. This has resulted in a concurrent increase in restrictions on the freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and systematic repression of minorities, atheists, and secular Bangladeshis. Large-scale violence against these vulnerable groups has continued, as religious extremists became empowered. Human rights conditions continue to deteriorate in Bangladesh as the rights of religious minorities are violated with impunity. The actions of the government, opposition activists, and non-state actors defy basic human rights as guaranteed under international law.

Even today, this history of mass killings and ethnic cleansing continues to influence political dynamics and the security of normalcy of the Bengali people. March 25, 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of this horrific genocide and this lesson examines the historical atrocities and religious persecution of the Bengali Hindu population.

# Lesson Plan

## SUBJECT

- › World History
- › Geography
- › World Government

## GRADE LEVEL

High school, 10th – 12th grade

## TIME

Four class periods at 45 minutes

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- › define and explore the concepts of genocide and sovereignty
- › comprehend the history of the Bangladesh Genocide
- › identify the ten stages of genocide and the complexity that each phase encompasses
- › analyze why the United States has failed to recognize this historical event as a genocide to date
- › reflect on actions that they can take as individuals to prevent future genocides

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

- › **R1:** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- › **R9:** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
- › **SL1:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- › **SL2:** Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.
- › **L4:** Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
- › **L6:** Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) COMPETENCIES

- › **Self-Awareness:** The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
- › **Social Awareness:** The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts.
- › **Responsible Decision-Making:** The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

# TECHNIQUES AND SKILLS

analyzing primary documents, brainstorming, connecting past to present, cooperative group work, creating a timeline, critical thinking, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, reading skills, research skills

# KEYWORDS AND TERMS

- › *Bengali*
- › *Hindu*
- › *Classification*
- › *Dehumanization*
- › *Denial*
- › *Ethnic Cleansing*
- › *Extermination*
- › *Fifth Column*
- › *Gender-based violence (GBV)*
- › *Genocide*
- › *Genocine Conventions*
- › *Operation Searchlight*
- › *Organization*
- › *Persecution*
- › *Polarization*
- › *Preparation*
- › *Propaganda*
- › *Refugees*
- › *Secession*
- › *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*
- › *Symbolization*
- › *United Nations*

## PART A: SETTING THE TONE AND DEFINING GENOCIDE

Students will be introduced to concepts such as genocide and the role of international bodies in addressing them.

1. **Use the following guiding questions to initiate whole class discussion and check for understanding from students.**
  - What is genocide?
  - What are some examples of past or ongoing genocides?
  - What are some patterns we can infer from these examples?
    - When does genocide occur?
    - How does genocide occur?
  - What role does the United Nations play in genocides?
    - How do they prevent genocides?
    - How do they contribute to resolutions?
  - What role has the United States played, if any?
2. **Explain the term genocide as described by the United Nations in 1951 and discuss as a whole class its meaning. Refer to the past genocides from the warm-up questions and discussion with students.**

### United Nations in 1951

**Article I:** The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish.

**Article II:** In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

**Article III:** The following acts shall be punishable:

- (a) Genocide
- (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide
- (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide
- (d) Attempt to commit genocide
- (e) Complicity in genocide

3. **Distribute The Ten Stages of Genocide (on page 10) to students and have them describe each stage in one to two sentences using their own words.**
4. **Break students into small groups and have them share their summary statements with each other.**
5. **As a whole class discuss each stage in further detail to ensure comprehension as well as to reiterate that:**
  - While genocide is a process that develops in ten stages, the process is not linear as stages may occur simultaneously and each stage itself is a process.
  - The later stages are often preceded by earlier stages. Correctly defining each stage helps identify stages of the genocidal process.
  - By understanding and defining each stage, it helps prevent future genocides.
  - The dominant group in this context is not necessarily the larger group or majority but can also be a smaller minority group that ascends in power.

## THE TEN STAGES OF GENOCIDE

STAGE	DESCRIPTION
<b>Classification</b>	The dominant group uses categories such as race, religion, ethnicity, or nationality, to distinguish between “us and them.”
<b>Symbolization</b>	The dominant group assigns other groups particular names and/or visual symbols to differentiate them.
<b>Discrimination</b>	The dominant group uses law, custom, and political power to deny the rights of other groups.
<b>Dehumanization</b>	The dominant group denies the humanity of the others by equating them with animals, insects, or disease often through the use of hate propaganda.
<b>Organization</b>	The dominant group employs formal or informal methods using training and armed militias to mask responsibility.
<b>Polarization</b>	The dominant group implements laws or hate propaganda to forbid intermarriage or social interactions and extremists prey on moderates in their own group to acquiesce.
<b>Preparation</b>	The dominant group leaders identify and separate victims by moving them to new regions, preparing lists of their names, confiscating property and items of value, and forcing them to wear identifying symbols.
<b>Persecution</b>	The dominant group mark houses with symbols and individuals are identified and rounded up as death lists become public.
<b>Extermination</b>	The dominant group organizes genocidal massacres, kills are not seen as murder but instead as a cleansing, and there is coordination between state army and militias.
<b>Denial</b>	The dominant group dig mass graves, burn bodies to try and cover up evidence as a refusal to allow accountability, victims are blamed and labels such as “natural causes,” civil war, and self-defense are used to create doubt until it’s over. An appeal to national interests of potential interveners occurs.

## PART B: APPLICATION AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

In this part of the lesson, students will apply what they know about genocide and its stages to research the conflict in Bangladesh.

1. Review the Ten Stages of Genocide with students.
2. Explain that they will use Bangladesh as a case example to research more about a conflict that many do not know about.
3. Share the reading list on page 9 and encourage students to do additional research on their own.
4. Distribute the graphic organizer on page 7 as a starting point for understanding the genocide, the war, and the actors involved.
5. Ask students to reflect on what they have read and discovered by answering the following questions either in a group discussion or through an independent short-answer essay:
  - What role did the United States play in the Bangladesh Genocide?
  - Why do you think this genocide is not more well-known?
  - What can the United States do now to memorialize the Bangladesh Genocide?
  - Why would the label of genocide be resisted or denied by other countries?
  - How can individuals and leaders recognize and respond to indications that a country is at risk for genocide or mass atrocity?

## PART C: VARYING PERSPECTIVES ON THE BANGLADESH CONFLICT

Since 1971, Bangladesh has faced a number of challenges which have impacted the quality of life for residents. Students will research these challenges and provide recommendations based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

1. Explain that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), officially known as Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a set of 17 “Global Goals” with 169 targets among them. Spearheaded by the United Nations through a deliberative process involving its 193 Member States as well as global civil society, the goals are contained in paragraph 54 of United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/1 of September 25, 2015.
2. Have students research the [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) with their knowledge about the Bangladesh genocide and ethnic cleansing in mind.
3. Students will complete the chart on page 8 and make their recommendations based on the current state of affairs in Bangladesh and will provide an explanation of how it will benefit the country moving forward.

## PART D: TAKING ACTION

To raise awareness, have students write letters to advocate for the following:

- › Petition the UN to recognize the 1971 war in Bangladesh as Genocide
- › [Recommend that the International Association of Genocide Scholars \(IAGS\)](#) classify and recognize the 1971 war in Bangladesh as Genocide
- › [Propose that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) recognize and include in their programming the 1971 war in Bangladesh as Genocide
- › [Urge Members of Congress to Make A Statement](#) Commemorating the 1971 Bengali Hindu Genocide
- › [Send an actions statement](#) to elected officials

## BANGLADESH GENOCIDE OF 1971

<b>ACTORS AND ALLIES</b>	<b>MOTIVES AND INTENT</b>
<b>SUMMARY OF CONFLICT</b>	

STAGE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS
Classification	
Symbolization	
Discrimination	
Dehumanization	
Organization	
Polarization	
Preparation	
Persecution	
Extermination	
Denial	



# MOVING BANGLADESH FORWARD

Using the SDGs as a guide, complete the chart below with recommendations based on the current state of affairs in Bangladesh today.

 <p><b>1</b> NO POVERTY</p>		 <p><b>9</b> INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE</p>	
 <p><b>2</b> ZERO HUNGER</p>		 <p><b>10</b> REDUCED INEQUALITIES</p>	
 <p><b>3</b> GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING</p>		 <p><b>11</b> SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES</p>	
 <p><b>4</b> QUALITY EDUCATION</p>		 <p><b>12</b> RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION</p>	
 <p><b>5</b> GENDER EQUALITY</p>		 <p><b>13</b> CLIMATE ACTION</p>	
 <p><b>6</b> CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION</p>		 <p><b>14</b> LIFE BELOW WATER</p>	
 <p><b>7</b> AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY</p>		 <p><b>15</b> LIFE ON LAND</p>	
 <p><b>8</b> DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH</p>		 <p><b>16</b> PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS</p>	
 <p><b>17</b> PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS</p>			



To learn more about the Sustainable Development Goals, please visit [globalgoals.org](http://globalgoals.org).



# Student Resources For Further Reading

## Background Information on Bangladesh

- › Bangladesh: Country Case Study  
<https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/bangladesh>
- › 1971 Rapes: Bangladesh Cannot Hide History  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/worldviews/2012/05/21/1971-rapes-bangladesh-cannot-hide-history>
- › Riots Arouse Moslem Shame  
<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/01/24/archives/riots-arouse-moslem-shame.html>
- › Breaking Cycles of Distrust: Preventing Mass Atrocities in Bangladesh  
<https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/201711-preventing-mass-atrocities-bangladesh.pdf>
- › Bangladesh: The Forgotten Genocide  
<https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/2017/04/21/bangladesh-forgotten-genocide/>
- › Bangladesh war: The article that changed history  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16207201>
- › Bangladesh Genocide Archive  
<http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/>
- › Scars of Bangladesh independence war 40 years on  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16111843>
- › The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget  
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>
- › Bangladesh's genocide debate: A conscientious research  
<https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/bangladesh%E2%80%99s-genocide-debate;-a-conscientious-research/>

- › Flawed Justice in Bangladesh  
<https://thediplomat.com/2013/10/flawed-justice-in-bangladesh/>
- › The Female Factor: Bangladesh Protests Break Boundaries  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/worldviews/2013/02/13/the-female-factor-bangladesh-protests-break-boundaries/?sh=379f1c1934da>
- › Bengali Hindu Genocide: A Timeline of Events  
<https://www.hinduamerican.org/1971-bangladesh-genocide#timeline>

## U.S. Government Related

- › Sen. Kennedy visits refugee camps  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUoTGddDV3E>
- › Memo From Bangladesh  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/world/asia/bangladesh-archer-blood-cable.html>
- › Archer Blood - An American's sacrifice for Bangladesh  
<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/peripherally-yours/archer-blood-americans-sacrifice-bangladesh-1332442>
- › Telegram From the Consulate General in Dacca to the Department of State  
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v11/d19>
- › Telegram 1249 From the Consulate General in Dacca to the Department of State  
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve07/d130>
- › Congressional record on S. 2779 for relief aid to Bangladesh  
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1971-pt29/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1971-pt29-5-1.pdf>
- › The 17 Sustainable Development Goals  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

## THE TEN STAGES OF GENOCIDE

Complete this graphic organizer by describing the events of each genocide stage.

STAGE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS
Classification	
Symbolization	
Discrimination	
Dehumanization	
Organization	
Polarization	
Preparation	
Persecution	
Extermination	
Denial	

# Notes

Dotted lines for writing notes.





The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an educational and advocacy organization established in 2003.

HAF focuses on educating the public about Hindus and Hinduism and advocating for policies and practices that ensure the well-being of all people and the planet. We work directly with educators and journalists to ensure accurate understanding of Hindus and Hinduism. We also work with policymakers and key stakeholders to champion issues of concern to Hindu Americans, including defending civil and human rights and protecting all living beings. Inspired by our guiding principles and Hindu teachings, HAF promotes dignity, mutual respect, and pluralism.

HAF is a non-partisan, non-profit tax-exempt public charity pursuant to Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)3.

**To learn more, please visit our website at [hinduamerican.org](http://hinduamerican.org)  
and follow us on social media: @hinduamerican.**

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